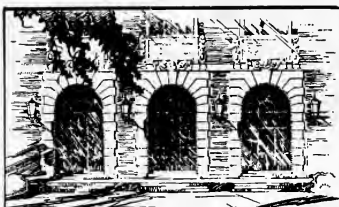


MATTHEW·AUSTIN·

W·E·NORRIS·



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MATTHEW AUSTIN

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BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF 'MDLE. DE MERSAC,' 'HIS GRACE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLS.

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MATTHEW AUSTIN



CHAPTER I

RETIREMENT

‘IT just depends upon how one looks at things,’ remarked Leonard. ‘For my part, I can’t see the use of moping, and if you’ll excuse my reminding you of it, Lil, you owe something to the living as well as to the dead.’

This was some weeks after Lady Sara’s funeral, and as Lilian had not stirred out of the house since that melancholy day, her husband was surely entitled to remonstrate with her. He himself, it is true, had not been required to share his wife’s seclusion and had begun to go about again as usual ; still it was depressing, when he did come home, to find that mournful, tacitly accusing figure always seated in the same chair. He thought, too, that if she had been alive to a sense of her duties, she would have noticed how worried he often was, and would have tried, as a good wife should, to cheer him up a little. Lilian, on the other hand, was of opinion that he might at least have

made some show of sympathising with her in her grief, even though it was so obviously out of his power to participate in it.

‘I don’t know what you want me to do,’ she answered wearily; ‘I can’t give or accept invitations, and I don’t suppose you would care to walk about the streets with me. I wish we could go to Stanwick!’

‘Well, we shall go there when the time comes,’ returned Leonard impatiently. ‘As we have got to pay the rent for this house, it seems to me that we may as well occupy it until the end of our term. Besides, you wouldn’t find Stanwick, with nobody staying in the house, much more cheerful than London, I’m afraid.’

There might have been a reconciliation between the couple, and perhaps it was as much Lilian’s fault as Leonard’s that nothing of the sort had taken place. She meant to do her duty; her mother’s last words had produced a strong impression upon her, and if she had been less fond of the man, she would probably have found it much easier to forgive his heartlessness. But she loved him still, and she knew that he was not what she had taken him for, and fifty times a day he made her wince by speeches which had never been intended to have that effect. Therefore she answered him coldly, driving him to seek oblivion of his money troubles elsewhere; so that their estrangement became chronic. He concluded the present discussion, which lasted a few minutes longer, by saying:

‘You must do as you please; but I should have thought that, for your own sake, it would be better not to shut your door against everybody. Yesterday I met Vawdrey, who was

very anxious to look us up ; but I was obliged to tell him that there wouldn't be the slightest use in his calling.'

'I shouldn't mind seeing Mr Vawdrey,' said Lilian ; 'if you meet him again, you can tell him so. He doesn't know me well enough to say the maddening things which old friends would be sure to say. I will see the old friends too, if you will let me wait just a little longer. After all, my shutting myself up doesn't prevent *you* from seeing as many people as you like.'

A few days later Mr Vawdrey presented himself while Leonard was out, and his brief visit gave Lilian the first pleasant quarter of an hour that she had spent since their last meeting. He was rather shy at first, being evidently in doubt as to whether he ought to mention her loss or not ; but having made up his mind to do so, he spoke with such direct simplicity and was so unaffectedly sorry for her that she found it not only possible but comforting to talk with him upon the subject.

'Yes, I know ; I expect that is what everybody feels,' he said, in answer to one remark of hers ; 'I felt just the same about my poor old governor. I wasn't as good a son to him as I ought to have been ; more than once I went larking off with other fellows when I might have spent my leave at home. But, after all, I'm sure he forgave me, and you may depend upon it that your mother forgave you. That is, if she had really anything to forgive.'

'Oh, she had a great deal to forgive,' said Lilian sadly. 'I shouldn't feel quite such a wretch if I didn't see now how

unselfish she always was with me. At the time I took it all as a right. Indeed, I often used to think I was behaving admirably by giving way to her, when she only wished to do the best she could for me.'

Vawdrey nodded.

'Yes, that's where the shoes pinches,' he agreed. 'But I sometimes say to myself when I'm dead sick of sitting in the House that anyhow I'm carrying out the old man's wishes, though it's too late for him to know. It isn't much, but it's something; and I daresay you might do the same in a different sort of way.'

This homely method of consolation appealed to Lilian, who had not been left in ignorance of her mother's wishes, and it certainly did not occur to her that the holding of confidential intercourse with an unattached member of the other sex was a somewhat odd fashion of giving effect to them. Vawdrey was not an admirer; or if he was so, he was an admirer *pour le bon motif*. It refreshed her to look at his honest face and listen to his honest talk, and this species of refreshment was dealt out to her in the sequel with no niggardly hand. He found his way to Hans Place as often as his duty to his country, his constituents and the Parliamentary whips would allow him, and his visits soon became the one bright feature in Lilian's solitary existence. Leonard, too, liked the man, with whom he had many tastes in common; so that when the master of the house chanced to be dining at home on Sunday evening (which did not occur every week) it was generally arranged that Mr Vawdrey should be present in the

character of that third person who does not under all circumstances spoil company.

It cannot, however, be said that Vawdrey entertained any sentiments of amity for his host. He had by no means forgotten certain words of which he had been an unwilling hearer at Ascot, nor could he help noticing, with suppressed wrath, what he considered Jerome's ostentatious neglect of his wife. A fellow wasn't bound, of course, to mourn very profoundly for his mother-in-law; but it was scarcely decent to go about like that within a few weeks of a family bereavement; besides which, there was something almost insulting, as well as cruel, in the contrast between Jerome's present mode of life and that led by Mrs Jerome. This was Vawdrey's view, and sometimes he had much ado to restrain himself from giving utterance to it.

On one occasion he was obliged to rise and leave the house abruptly, fearing lest, if he stayed five minutes longer, he might say things which would have the effect of bringing his acquaintance with the Jeromes to a premature close. It was a mere trifle—in such cases it always is—that caused the smouldering animosity between the husband and wife, which ordinarily found expression rather in distant civility than in open dissension, to break for a moment into flame. Leonard had mentioned that a certain magnate, whose castle was situated in the neighbourhood of Stanwick, was in the habit of holding a cricket-week every summer in his park, with accompanying festivities in the shape of dances and theatricals.

'I suppose,' he added, 'we may as well ask some people

to stay with us then ; it's about the only time in the course of the year when we shall be able to hold out the faintest prospect of amusement to them. I wish you would join the gay throng, Vawdrey, if you haven't anything better for the first week of August. We shall be giving a dance ourselves most likely.'

'We can't do that,' said Lilian quietly, but decisively.

'I think we shall have to do it,' Leonard returned, a slight flush rising to his cheeks. 'The other people in the county are sure to entertain us pretty freely as soon as we go home, and we must make some acknowledgment. Why do you say that we can't?'

'Only because I am in deep mourning. You forgot that, I suppose, when you spoke of our being entertained. Of course I shall have to decline all invitations.'

Leonard was a good-tempered man ; but his temper had been subjected to severe trials of late, and it must be owned that her tone was not conciliatory.

'May I ask,' he inquired, 'how long you propose to keep up this sort of thing?' Receiving no answer, he went on, with increased irritation. 'It is quite out of date, you know—this smothering yourself up in crape and refusing to be seen. Nobody does it nowadays ; it's ridiculous and inconvenient, and it isn't any real proof of sorrow. I take it that we are not more heartless than the last generation, only perhaps we're a little less hypocritical.'

'I don't think I am a hypocrite,' said Lilian ; 'as for being ridiculous, I daresay I can bear that. I am sorry to put you to inconvenience, but I am afraid I can't help it. My being

in mourning hasn't inconvenienced you very much so far, you must admit.'

'Well, I can't say that you seem to me to have studied my convenience—or anybody's except your own.'

He would have proceeded to speak a good deal more strongly, had he not, in the nick of time, become alive to the circumstance that a juvenile member of Parliament was staring at him with eyes of amazed apprehension. A vulgar conjugal row in the presence of an outsider was inadmissible, much though he wished to get his breath out; so he broke off with a laugh, saying;

'Well, never mind! But I put it to you, Vawdrey, as a reasonable being—if she can manage to talk cheerfully with a friend like yourself, oughtn't she to be able just to exchange a few observations and eat her dinner in the company of some country neighbours who may be bores, but who will have to be put up with sooner or later?'

It was at this juncture that Mr Vawdrey had to seize his hat, stammer out something incoherent about an appointment and take to his heels. He would have liked to invite his friend Jerome to accompany him to some quiet spot, take off his coat and roll up his sleeves; but that fashion of intimating to a fellow-creature that he does not possess your esteem cannot be resorted to in highly-civilised communities, nor could society hold together for a single day if a man were permitted to say just what he thought.

What Mr Vawdrey thought was that Mrs Jerome's husband was a downright brute; so it was as well that he had self-control

enough to say nothing. It would have been better also if he had abstained from saying anything a few days after, when he found Lilian alone; but since she chose to ask his opinion as to whether it was her duty to entertain and be entertained in those northern latitudes whither she was shortly to be transported, he was fain to reply, with some warmth:

‘I don’t know so much about your duty, but I haven’t a doubt about Jerome’s. A man’s first duty is to his wife, and he has no business to ask you to do what would make you miserable.’

‘I suppose he doesn’t believe that it would make me miserable,’ said Lilian.

‘Then he ought to believe it. The truth is that what he had the imp—that what he said the other day about you ought to have been said about himself: he studies nobody’s convenience except his own.’

Whatever the reciprocal duties of a husband and wife may be, it is certain that neither should discuss the other’s character with a third person. Lilian, being sensible of this, administered the gentle rebuke which the occasion called for and changed the subject. But she shared Vawdrey’s opinion, all the same.

‘What has become of your friend Mr Frere?’ she asked, merely by way of starting the conversation again, and because he looked too crestfallen to undertake that task for himself. ‘Is he still in England, or has he joined his wife at some foreign watering-place?’

‘Oh, he’s in England,’ answered Vawdrey, laughing in an

embarrassed and deprecating way. 'In point of fact, he's doing secretary for me just now.'

'Dear me! Is your correspondence so large that you require a secretary?'

'Well, there really are a lot of letters; you've no idea what a lot of letters a man gets when he's in Parliament. Of course I don't mean to say that Frere hasn't rather an easy berth of it; but he said he didn't mind taking it as a stop-gap, and it may lead to something better.'

'I should think he would be in no hurry to make a change. Probably you give him a large salary.'

'No, indeed; only just enough to keep him—'

'Honest?'

'Ah! you're too hard upon him! Frere is a much better chap than you think, and I dare say he's much better than I should be if I had been through what he has. His wife offered to allow him three hundred a year, upon the condition that he lived away from her; but he wouldn't take it. He said he preferred to shift for himself.'

'Meaning that he preferred to let you shift for him.'

'Of course you can put it in that way, if you choose,' answered Vawdrey, looking distressed, for he had mentally idealised Lilian, and he did not like to hear her say spiteful things; 'but it was before I offered him the secretaryship that he refused to touch her money. I suppose I mightn't bring him here some day, might I?'

'I can't honestly say that I should enjoy seeing him,' answered Lilian; 'but it doesn't much matter, because he won't

want to come. I doubt whether he likes me any better than I like him.'

It appeared, however, that Spencer was, for some reason or other, desirous of renewing acquaintance with the lady who had given him so little encouragement. Accordingly, he paid his respects one afternoon, and if Lilian, upon closer scrutiny, was unable to discern any good points about the man, she had to acknowledge that his manners were no longer objectionable. He sat, with his hat between his knees, watching and listening, but only speaking when he was spoken to, and although something was said about Wilverton, he refrained from mentioning Matthew Austin's name. Only, as he walked away, he remarked laconically to his friend and patron :

'There will be a row in that house soon, you'll see. You know your own business best ; but I wouldn't be mixed up in it if I were you.'

'I certainly shall not be mixed up in it in the way that you mean,' answered Vawdrey rather sharply. Then he asked, with a touch of anxiety : 'Why do you say that there will be a row ? Are people talking about it ?'

'Oh, it's notorious,' answered Spencer, a good deal of whose leisure time was spent in listening to gossip which had passed through the lips of many informants before it reached him, 'that our good friends Mr and Mrs Jerome are two. Let us hope that they will arrange matters without troubling the President of the Divorce Court.'

The circumstance to which he alluded really was, in a restricted sense, notorious. 'People'—that is to say, the people

who knew the Jeromes—had been mildly scandalised earlier in the season, and now saw their previous suspicions confirmed by Leonard's frequent appearances amongst them without his wife. It was all very well, they shrewdly remarked, to say that her retirement was due to her mother's recent death, but that did not explain her refusal to admit visitors. It was, therefore, necessary to suggest or invent explanations, some of which even found their way to a point as far distant from the gay world as Wilverton.

It was Mr Litton who first communicated current reports to Matthew.

'Leonard's marriage seems to be turning out very much as might have been anticipated,' was the old man's comment upon what he had heard. 'They tell me that he is to blame, and I can well believe it; but I shall be very much surprised if it does not turn out that she has been to blame also. What else could he expect of a woman who had already shown herself to be as shameless as she was fickle? Excuse my employing the adjectives that belong to her; I would not do so if I did not feel sure that you had quite got over your former weakness in that quarter.'

'Nevertheless, I would rather that you did not apply those adjectives to Mrs Jerome,' Matthew returned; 'to the best of my belief, they don't belong to her. If there is really anything like a serious quarrel—but that will prove to have been an exaggeration, I hope—the cause probably is that he cannot feel as she does about poor Lady Sara's death. What you tell me as to his being seen everywhere without her sounds as if that might be it.'

‘It sounds to me a good deal more as if they were tired of one another already,’ Mr Litton remarked. ‘As for Lady Sara, the chances are that he doesn’t treat her memory with any great respect ; for she left next to nothing, I understand—which must have been a disappointment to him. But, whatever may be the matter, it is evident that he and his wife are repenting at their leisure of what they did in haste. A time may even come when he will repent of having made me look foolish by losing an election which a very little exertion would have enabled him to win. Meanwhile, possession is nine points of the law, and it will be a hard matter to get the seat back now that Baxendale has secured it.’

Mr Litton was not a very ardent politician ; but he had been mortified by the discomfiture of the party to which he belonged, and he was so determined to fix all responsibility for that discomfiture upon his nephew that Matthew had ceased to take up the cudgels on Leonard’s behalf. What the old man wanted now was contrition and submission ; it was not unlikely that he would get what he wanted ere long, Matthew thought, though it seemed extremely unlikely that Sir William Baxendale would be unseated at the next general election.

The successful candidate had departed for Park Lane, where he resided when in London, without having taken any steps towards altering his widowed condition. That much Matthew had ascertained ; but Mrs Frere, who had been his informant, did not seem to be at all discouraged.

‘He will be coming home again in the summer,’ she said cheerfully, ‘and then we shall see. Really, when one comes to

think of it, it's almost impossible that Anne should refuse him. In some cases, of course, one can't feel sure; but that is when there has been somebody else. Now, there never was anybody else in her case, because we have never been able to give her the chance, poor dear !'

Matthew was too honest to say that he hoped Mrs Frere's wishes might be fulfilled, although he could not but acknowledge that they were very natural and excusable wishes for a mother to entertain. There are, however, many events, desirable in the abstract, at the accomplishment of which one does not care to assist in the character of a spectator, and as the slack season had now set in, Matthew decided somewhat suddenly to go off to Switzerland for a well-earned holiday. Somehow or other, he was growing a little tired of Wilverton, and as he stepped into the train, he told himself that it would do him good to turn his back upon the place for a season.

CHAPTER II

LILIAN AS A HOSTESS

‘CHEERFUL, isn’t it?’ said Leonard. ‘Jolly sort of place to live in all the year round.’

He was standing, after breakfast, by one of the high, narrow windows of the Stanwick Hall dining-room, and it must be confessed that the rain-enshrouded landscape before him looked sufficiently dreary to justify the lugubrious air with which he regarded it.

‘But it isn’t always like this, I suppose,’ answered Lilian, rising from the table and drawing a little nearer to him.

‘Oh, not always; sometimes there is snow and more often there are black north-easters. But the sky is always grey, and the trees always present the appearance of having had their back hair combed over their eyes, and the general aspect of things is always one of forlorn solitude. To be sure, you have developed a taste for solitude.’

If she had, he did not mean her to gratify it more than he could help. They had arrived from London on the previous day, having remained there until the fag-end of the season, and the first batch of guests who had been prevailed upon to visit them in their remote home was expected for the morrow.

‘What are we going to do with them?—that’s the question,’

said Leonard despondingly. 'There will be the cricket, of course, if they care to look on at it—which they probably won't—and there will be the dance and the theatricals at the Castle ; but upon my word, it's almost brutal to ask people to stay with you when you aren't allowed even to invite a few friends to meet them at dinner !'

Lilian conceded the dinner—'half a dozen dinners if you like'—but as she drew the line at a ball, her concession earned her scanty gratitude. She was strongly of opinion that she would have been within her right had she declined to receive anybody, while Leonard was just as strongly of opinion that her chief wish was to thwart him ; so that they spent a sufficiently unhappy day and were not sorry to be delivered from one another's chilling politeness by the advent of their guests.

These, as Leonard himself confessed, were 'a mixed lot.' It is not everybody who is ready to jump at an invitation to a country house in the extreme north-east corner of England at a time of year when plenty of pleasanter quarters are obtainable, and the Papillons had to be included in the list, with a deprecatory shrug on the part of their host. Not that Lilian objected to the Papillons or that there was any occasion to offer apologies for them. The days had gone by when the languishing glances, or even the risky remarks, of a lady who belonged to the extinct class of professional beauties had had power to make Mrs Jerome's blood boil. It was almost amusing, it certainly was not in the least distressing, to watch her little coquetries and catch fragments of the reproaches which she was pleased to address to one who had begun by admiring and had subse-

quently neglected her. Mrs Papillon or another—what did it signify, since Leonard evidently found it essential to his comfort that there should be somebody? Indeed, the woman was not much, if at all, more uncongenial than her companions of both sexes, whose appetites had to be satisfied and whose requirements had to be studied as far as an insufficient staff of servants would allow.

Lilian was not brilliantly successful as a hostess; no doubt it would have been impossible for her to be so without a far larger supply of horses and ready money than could be accorded to her, and her husband might have remembered that. However, he only saw that she did not like his friends, that she played her part in a laborious, perfunctory way, that she offered no suggestions for their entertainment and that the culinary arrangements were defective. Having no head for details, he never took into account the small daily worries by which she was beset, nor did he give her credit for working hard—as she actually was doing—to battle with them. He thought himself a *réal* good fellow because he refrained from uttering the remonstrances which were upon the tip of his tongue.

Not many of us, it is to be feared, would have the audacity to describe ourselves as real good fellows if we only knew what the other real good fellows are in the habit of saying about us, and Mr Vawdrey, for one, was by no means disposed to confer that title upon a host who welcomed him heartily. Vawdrey arrived one evening, in response to the invitation which he had received, and drove up from the station in company with Lady Bannock, who had contrived to spare a few days to her brother

on her way north. Perhaps her ladyship's affectionate eulogies of 'poor, dear Leonard,' did not please her fellow-traveller : at any-rate, he could not resist saying that, however dear Jerome might be, Mrs Jerome seemed to him to be the more deserving of compassion of the two. Consequently, Lady Bannock received a disagreeable impression of Mr Vawdrey, which was confirmed by her subsequent observation of him.

Yet he did not behave at all badly. If Lilian was glad to see him, if her voice softened and her face brightened up when he spoke to her, if he preferred staying at home with her to looking on at third-class cricket with the rest of the house-party, and if he was sometimes a little short in his replies to Leonard, these were surely very slight foundations upon which to ground a whole superstructure of scandalous suspicion. But Lady Bannock had never liked either her brother's marriage or his wife ; so that she was scarcely an unprejudiced spectator of incidents which seemed to cause no disquietude to her brother himself. She believed Lilian to be a confirmed flirt, she had her doubts as to the morality of any member of the luckless Kingsbridge family, and she saw—as indeed nobody could well help seeing—that the Jeromes had ceased to be a devoted couple.

'Bother that doctor-man !' this really kind-hearted lady was provoked into muttering under her breath ; 'why on earth couldn't he insist upon his rights when he had them ? I was sorry for him at the time, I remember, but I am a great deal more sorry for Leonard now.'

She was determined to be sorry for Leonard, who, nevertheless, seemed to be pretty well satisfied with his present lot. The

weather became fine ; he found that, after all, there was something to do every day ; Mrs Papillon amused him, and it was a relief to him to hear Lilian laugh again every now and then. Since Vawdrey alone appeared to have the gift of making her laugh, there was cause for thankfulness in the fact, that Vawdrey seemed inclined to prolong his visit. He was also quite pleased with his wife and grateful to her for consenting to join a picnic expedition to Radworth, a little fishing village on the coast, where there were sands and cliffs and a view over the grey expanse of the North Sea, which people who admired nature under her more sombre aspects had been heard to praise. Radworth was not, to tell the truth, a particularly attractive spot ; still, with lobster mayonnaise, champagne and Mrs Papillon in the foreground and a clear sky overhead, it answered his purpose fairly well.

Lady Bannock opined that it was answering Lilian's purpose into the bargain when she saw her hostess and Mr Vawdrey stroll off together towards the dilapidated old church on the heights above the harbour, after partaking of a very moderate amount of refreshment. But, as a matter of fact, Lilian's thoughts were not for the moment occupied with her companion, nor was she listening to his remarks.

'Do you want to see that church?' she asked suddenly, addressing him for the first time, as soon as they had reached the summit of the acclivity. 'There are some ancient brasses in it, I believe ; but one brass is exactly the same as another to me—and I should think it was to you too.'

'I could die contentedly without ever setting eyes upon

another brass, ancient or modern ; I want to do just what you want to do, that's all,' the young man replied, with his customary willingness to oblige.

'Oh, I only wanted to get away,' said Lilian, as she seated herself upon the short, crisp turf and drew her knees up to her chin. 'It seems to me,' she added presently, 'as if the rest of my life would probably be spent in wanting to get away.'

'It's an abominable shame that you can't!' burst out Vawdrey, replying rather to the despairing look upon her face than to her somewhat imprudent words.

There had been many previous talks between them during which she had sometimes spoken quite as unadvisedly, and had been answered after a fashion for which Vawdrey had taken himself to task in his cooler moments. He did not wish her to leave her husband ; he knew very well that such a step as that must needs prove more disastrous for her than living on in the most uncongenial of homes ; yet he could not endure to see her suffering, and it occasionally struck him—as it is apt to strike a good many people—that some means ought to be devised of annulling unhappy marriages by mutual consent. However, she did not seem to have understood him.

'I don't know that there is any shame about it,' she answered indifferently ; 'it's unlucky if you like. Most people could get away, because most people have heaps of relations whom they could go and stay with ; but I am badly provided for in that respect. Besides, it's my duty to remain at home and entertain visitors, I suppose.'

'I wonder whether you could be persuaded to come and

stay with my people for a bit!’ exclaimed the young fellow eagerly. ‘We wouldn’t have anybody else in the house, and you could do just what you liked, you know, and—and it’s rather a pretty place. My mother and the girls would be awfully glad to see you.’

‘I am not so sure of that,’ returned Lilian, shaking her head and laughing a little. ‘No; thank you very much for thinking of it, but I am afraid I couldn’t take advantage of your invitation. Besides, you forget my visitors. I wish,’ she concluded, with a reflective sigh, ‘that I didn’t dislike them so much!’

‘As if you could help disliking them!—*some* of them, anyhow.’

Lilian turned her head to glance inquiringly at him; for the vehemence and bitterness of his intonation surprised her.

‘Ought I to have a special detestation for any individual among them?’ she asked. ‘You mean Mrs Papillon, perhaps; but really I don’t much mind Mrs Papillon now, though I used to mind her once upon a time. She isn’t a very alarming rival.’

‘That’s hardly the question, is it? In one sense such a woman couldn’t possibly be your rival; it would be ridiculous to mention you in the same breath! But in another sense any scullery-maid might be.’

Never before had Vawdrey ventured to use such unequivocal language, although the fact of Lilian’s domestic unhappiness had not been concealed from him. The chilling rejoinder which he now received warned him that he had gone too far.

‘I haven’t reached the point of selecting ugly scullery-maids yet,’ she said. ‘Some women do, I believe; but it is not very easy to understand why they should think it worth while. Suppose we change the subject. How are you getting on with your constituents? Are you preparing to address them at great length and at short intervals during the recess?’

Vawdrey sighed and tried not to look as crestfallen as he felt.

‘Oh, yes,’ he answered; ‘my mother is a Primrose League Dame, and we are to have a big *al fresco* entertainment in the park soon, at which I shall have to stand on a platform and spout with the other long-winded nonentities of the district. Sack-races and Ethiopian minstrels and plenty of buns and tea may make some amends, one hopes. The disheartening part of the whole business is that not one in a thousand of the voters cares a brass farthing about his country, and we can’t appeal to their cupidity, because we have no absurd impossibilities to offer them, as the Radicals have. I’ve worked hard to get up the subject of agriculture, and I think I know something about it now; but I’ve nothing to say, except the truth—and they don’t like that. Frere tells me I might at least hold my tongue; only the mischief of it is that I ain’t allowed to hold my tongue.’

‘I dare say you will learn, though Mr Frere, as far as my experience of him goes, is not much in the habit of practising what he preaches,’ remarked Lilian. ‘You still cling to your secretary, then?’

‘Yes, and I find him more and more useful. I sometimes

wish we could change places, for he has ten times my brains and he seems to be interested in politics, which I hate. I suppose it's a cowardly view to take, but it seems to me that, since we Tories are beaten, we might as well say so and throw up the sponge at once, instead of attempting to outbid the other side. As we're in the right, why shouldn't we stand aside until the nation finds out by experience that it has been duped and calls us back?'

But this gallant effort to comply with Lilian's behests and divert the conversation into a safer channel met with no success. When two people are thinking of one and the same thing it is next door to impossible for them to avoid mentioning it for any length of time, and Lilian, whose indifference to her country's weal was, it is to be feared, almost as complete and as reprehensible as that of the agricultural labourer, ended by reverting to the topic which she herself had banished from the field of discussion.

'One talks of wanting to get away,' she remarked, *à propos* of nothing at all and without any pretence of having been interested in her companion's dissertation upon the advance of democracy, 'but it isn't so much from other people that one wants to get away as from one's self. How is that to be done?'

It is to be done in many different ways; but possibly Vawdrey was acquainted with none of these; for, instead of answering her question, he said decisively:

'You wouldn't want to get away from yourself unless there was somebody from whom you wanted to escape. And I'm sure I don't wonder that you should!'

Lilian was staring out over the brink of the cliff at the sands beneath, where Leonard and Mrs Papillon could be seen, engaged in the exciting pastime of throwing stones at a bottle.

‘I suppose you mean my husband,’ she said composedly.

‘I beg your pardon; I oughtn’t to have said it, of course; but—’

‘Oh, I don’t mind; you know us well enough now to know what the state of the case is, and I am not afraid of your repeating anything that I may say to you. All the same, I was not thinking of Leonard; he has as much reason to complain of me as I have of him. Only I can’t help being dull and stupid and a wet blanket. I wonder whether I shall always go on like this or whether I shall change all of a sudden, as I have often done before. If I do, the change isn’t likely to be for the better. My mother always used to be in terror lest I should end badly.’

The above sentences were uttered with a pause between each and were evidently fragments of an unspoken soliloquy. Lilian was gazing at the misty horizon line, where the pale blue sky met the grey sea; she seemed to have forgotten her neighbour and did not even turn her head when he exclaimed impetuously:

‘I wish you wouldn’t talk like that! It sounds as if you didn’t care what became of you.’

‘Why should I?’ she returned; ‘nobody else does. My mother cared; but she is dead now, and I don’t believe that dead people can see what is going on in this world. It would be too miserable for them if they could.’

‘Well, I can answer for it that there is one living person, anyhow, who cares a great deal for you,’ Vawdrey declared.

A tremor in his voice caused her to withdraw her eyes abruptly from the distant prospect and fix them upon the countenance of the speaker. It is a fact that until that moment she had never suspected the existence of what was plainly legible there, and the discovery was not a welcome one to her. On the other hand, she was not greatly shocked or perturbed by it, having become inured to similar discoveries. Disappointment and regret at the loss of a friend were the sole sentiments of which she was conscious as she rose to her feet, saying quietly :

‘Isn’t it nearly time for you to be going back home?’

‘Home?—to Stanwick, do you mean?’ he asked.

‘Well, I suppose we shall be going back to Stanwick presently,’ she replied, with a faint smile ; ‘but I meant that you had better return soon to your mother and your Primrose League meetings and all the rest of it. Don’t you think so yourself?’

A quick flush overspread his cheeks and faded away, leaving him rather pale. Perhaps it was not Lilian alone who had made a discovery during the past few minutes. However, he answered without hesitation and in a matter-of-fact tone of voice :

‘Yes, I expect the Primrose Leaguers will be clamouring for me ; I’ll be off by the first train to-morrow morning.’

There was no occasion to say more : they understood one another and they knew that their pleasant intimacy must cease.

For the moment, they were not sorry to be intruded upon by Lady Bannock, who had breasted the hill in search of them and who drew their attention somewhat acrimoniously to the church clock. No further opportunity for private converse fell to their lot that day; only on the following morning Vawdrey found that Lilian had come downstairs to superintend his early breakfast, and when she bade him farewell, she asked him to write to her sometimes.

‘Friendships can’t be kept up by post,’ she remarked; ‘still I don’t want you to forget me immediately, and I should like to hear how you get on. You might let me know of any important occurrence in your life—such as your marriage, for instance, which seems to be inevitable.’

‘I shall never marry,’ he answered decisively; but he could not trust himself to give reasons for that positive statement, and he was driven away from Stanwick to the accompaniment of the incredulous laughter which it merited.

As for Lady Bannock, she breathed more freely as soon as she heard of Mr Vawdrey’s departure.

‘If I were you, I wouldn’t have that young man in the house again,’ she had the indiscretion to say to her brother. ‘It may be all right, but with some people one never can feel quite certain, and Lilian is so—shall we say odd?’

‘We will call her odd, if you like,’ answered Leonard, with an impatient laugh; ‘she can’t be called even, anyhow. I’m sure I don’t know from one day to another how she will take things. For my own part, I’m only too glad to have anybody in the house whom she doesn’t hate; but it looks to me as if

we should soon have no house to put anybody in. If Uncle Richard persists in living and in buttoning up his pockets, I shall be broke before long.'

Several speeches of this kind had already been made to Lady Bannock, whose husband, although a rich man, was extremely unlikely to see the propriety of supporting her relations, so she hastened to effect her escape.

'There ought to be a son and heir,' she said querulously, as she left the room; 'that would set everything right. Why isn't there a son and heir?'

Indeed, it seemed to this good lady that Mrs Leonard Jerome had shown herself deficient in all the qualities which a wife ought to possess.

CHAPTER III

LEONARD PAYS HIS FRIEND A COMPLIMENT

THE woods round about Wilverton had already discarded the monotonous dark green of late summer for the yellow and brown and russet tints of autumn when Matthew Austin returned from a holiday which had lasted somewhat longer than he had originally intended it to do. Among the less-frequented valleys of the Alps he had found what he had started in search of—he had become bitten with a taste for mountaineering on an unambitious scale; his *locum tenens* had assured him that there was no occasion to hurry back, and by the time that he reached home once more he flattered himself that he was both physically and mentally a healthier man than when he had set forth on his travels.

He was, to be sure, a singularly lonely man; but then he had never in reality been anything else, and there are worse evils than solitude. At the same time, when one has no immediate belongings to care for or worry about, one naturally feels a keener interest in the destinies of one's acquaintances; so that Matthew was not a little anxious to hear the latest intelligence from Hayes Park. He betook himself thither two days after his arrival, and was received by Mrs Frere, who at once announced that she had no news of importance to give him. Sir William Baxendale, it appeared, had gone off to

Homburg at the end of the Session, instead of spending the summer at home, and had since been disporting himself at various pleasure-resorts upon the Continent.

‘However, he is expected shortly,’ Mrs Frere said, ‘and Emma corresponds regularly with Anne, which I think is a hopeful sign. Of course, one can’t expect a man of his age to be impetuous; though I am sure he wouldn’t keep me in this uncomfortable state of suspense if he only knew how much I want to get him settled and done for. Anne? Oh, she just jogs along as usual—anxious and troubled about many things, I am afraid, but not much about poor dear Sir William, as far as I can judge. Anxieties and troubles are unavoidable; but one should try to forget them when one can. I only wish I could persuade George to forget his!’ Mrs Frere paused for a moment, sighed, and then resumed: ‘I know you have heard something about our eldest son. I never like to mention him, because it is such a painful subject, but sometimes I can’t help wondering whether it might not be possible to give him one more chance. He has quarrelled with that vulgar wife of his, we hear, and now he is private secretary to a Mr Vawdrey, who is a man of property and a member of Parliament. I should have thought that sounded like a desire to become respectable; but George won’t see that there is any merit in his having separated himself from the woman—which of course there isn’t, in one sense—only, as we never could have received her—However,’ concluded Mrs Frere, in her customary philosophical way, ‘things often turn out better than one ventures to expect.’

Matthew said something commonplace. He was rather shy of talking about Spencer, having still a certain sore feeling as to the manner in which his interference with the affairs of the family scapegrace had been received, and he was glad when Mrs Frere at once rambled off into doubts whether Harry ought not to be recalled from India, in order to take his place as heir-presumptive.

‘Not that there will be much of an inheritance for him to succeed to, poor boy! The only thing is that, if we had him upon the spot, one might possibly find an heiress for him. I suppose you don’t happen to know of any young woman who is a lady and not bad-looking and has a few thousands a year of her own? Of course you don’t, though; there are no such young women nowadays, except Americans. After all, an American might do, if she didn’t insist upon a title. They are most of them pretty, you know, and some are clever, and I hear that their relations give very little trouble. Then the next thing will be to establish Maggie, who is growing up faster even than the weeds in my poor garden. What is to become of Dick I can’t think. George says we shall all be upon the parish before we die; but I tell him that a good dose of colchicum would drive all those dismal notions out of his head. By the way, what do you think of colchicum? They say it is an old-fashioned remedy which is coming into use again and that numbers of gouty people have been relieved by it.’

Matthew did not lend a very attentive ear to these and other disconnected remarks. He lingered on, in the hope

that Anne might come in ; but he had to take his leave at last, and it was with a slight sense of disappointment that he rose to say good-bye. Upon the doorstep, however, it was his good fortune to meet the predestined Lady Baxendale, who mentioned that she had just returned from a walk and was kind enough to add that she was glad to see him back again. She was looking remarkably handsome, he thought, her walk having given her a colour ; she was also very cheerful and amiable, insisting upon a circumstantial account of his wanderings, to which she listened with much apparent interest. Yet, somehow or other, she was no longer the Anne Frere whom he had met for the first time nearly two years before, and he was not at all sure that he did not prefer her old uncertain moods to her present determined politeness.

‘I suppose you know about Spencer,’ she said at length, conquering a visible reluctance to introduce that topic.

‘I only know what your mother told me just now—that he has left his wife and that he is acting as private secretary to somebody,’ Matthew answered.

‘To Mr Vawdrey. I thought perhaps you might have heard of him from the Jeromes. Mr Vawdrey is a great friend of Mrs Jerome’s, I believe,’ said Anne, and it struck Matthew that there was something rather odd about the voice in which this statement was made.

He glanced interrogatively at the speaker ; but as she volunteered nothing further, he merely remarked :

‘I don’t correspond with the Jeromes. All is well with them, I hope?’

'Oh, I don't correspond with them either,' answered Anne.
'Yes, I believe they are quite well. Spencer sometimes mentions them in his letters.'

'You do correspond with him, then?'

'He has written several times lately. No; not to ask for money; he says the salary that Mr Vawdrey gives him is quite as much as he wants and he is taking nothing from his wife. I think he is really fond of me, and he always speaks most warmly and gratefully of you.'

'He doesn't owe me anything,' said Matthew.

'He thinks that he owes you a great deal—which, of course, is the truth.'

There was a short interval of silence; after which Anne exclaimed, as if involuntarily:

'I wish I could believe him!'

'But can't you?'

'Not quite. I am afraid he only writes as he does, and talks about having turned over a new leaf, because he thinks I shall show his letters to my father or my mother. For the time being, he seems to be going on steadily; but I daren't hope that it will last. Don't you think it is great nonsense to say that there can be no such thing as love without respect?'

'Well, yes; I think it is rather nonsense,' answered Matthew reflectively. 'Judging by my own sensations and experience, I should say that it was quite possible to love a person for whom it was not possible to feel any great respect.'

Anne made a quick gesture of irritation.

'I don't think a *man* ought to feel like that,' she returned;

'it seems to me a little beneath him. A woman's case is altogether different.'

Then, perceiving that Matthew was somewhat surprised at being attacked for having agreed with her, she added impatiently :

'Oh, well, it can't be helped. Men and women, we are what we are, and there is no more to be said about it.'

He went away with the impression that she had been going to say something more, but that he had unintentionally checked or chilled her. Not for the first time since he had endeavoured to play the part of a friend to Anne Frere was this annoying conviction brought home to him, and it made him more impatient with her than he was wont to be with the failings of his fellow-mortals. For the rest, if she had been going to consult him as to the feasibility of Spencer's reinstatement, he could not have helped her. He knew that if he himself had been afflicted with a son like Spencer, he would have forgiven the man until seventy times seven ; but he was not at all perpared to assert that such a course would be expedient, and, in any event, the matter was one for Mr Frere's decision.

After this he saw very little more of Anne. The daily routine of his work soon claimed him again ; nobody being ill at Hayes Park, he had not the time to turn his horse's head in that direction, and it was only through Mrs Jennings that he learned every now and then, as the weeks passed on, how Sir William Baxendale had returned, how large shooting-parties were being held at the Priory, and how assiduously Anne was helping Miss Baxendale to entertain her brother's guests.

‘Quite as if she were one of the family already!’ the charitable creature said. ‘I am sure nobody will rejoice more sincerely than I shall if the Freres succeed; but it does seem rather imprudent to fling their daughter at the poor man’s head as they are doing. Enough to frighten him out of the county again—which would be a very great pity.’

Mrs Jennings, who knew everything, also knew, and stated that she had heard with the deepest regret, what a terrible mistake young Jerome’s hasty marriage was turning out. For her own part, she made a point of never judging anybody until the worst had been proved beyond a doubt, but she feared it was only too true that Mrs Jerome had been encouraging admirers—notably, a young man named Vawdrey, who had recently succeeded to large estates, and who had been staying at Stanwick Hall.

‘You may imagine what a sad trouble this is to poor old Mr Litton in his precarious state of health. Dr Jennings doubts whether he would survive the disgrace of an open scandal.’

One of the disadvantages of being an open scandal-monger is that, after having earned that reputation, you are not very likely to be believed even when you tell the truth, and Matthew, who saw the old recluse at the Grange pretty constantly, was sure that, if there had been any ground for Mrs Jennings’s assertions, he would have heard of it. As a matter of fact, Mr Litton seldom alluded to his nephew, except to make some sardonic remark as to the probability of his being requested ere long to pay the latter’s bills, while he disliked Lilian so much that, had he known anything against her, he assuredly would not

have failed to mention it. Matthew, therefore, saw no reason for believing that time had avenged him upon the supplanter who never ceased to be his friend, and to whom he wished nothing but good.

The first frosts of winter were hardening the ground and bringing down the withered leaves in showers when he was abruptly reminded that there are two ways of wishing your friends well, and that the practical method is apt to be a very inconvenient one. Returning home late and weary one evening, he was surprised to hear that Mr Jerome had been for two hours awaiting him in his study, and the words of welcome with which he hurried into the room died away upon his lips at the sight of his visitor's haggard countenance.

‘My dear fellow, what is the matter?’ he exclaimed.

‘I’m glad I look as if something was the matter,’ answered Leonard gloomily, while he took the other’s outstretched hand; ‘it saves introductory remarks—and goodness knows I *ought* to look pretty bad! Do you remember my telling you, the last time we met, that if ever I got into a hole, I should come straight to you? Well, here I am; and the long and short of it is that, unless you can help me out of this hole—which seems almost impossible—I shall have the bailiffs upon me before Christmas.’

‘Oh, it’s only money, then?’ said Matthew, with a sigh of relief.

‘Only money!—why, what would the man have? Oh, I see what you are thinking about. Well, yes; since I am making a clean breast of it, I may as well confess at once that Lilian and

I are not candidates for the Dunmow flitch. We haven't got on quite as well as we might have done ; I think her rather unreasonable and I dare say she thinks me rather unfeeling—you may have heard something about it, perhaps. But things will go more smoothly after a bit, if only I can manage to keep my head above water. If I can't, Heaven only knows what will happen !'

He was a little ashamed of himself, but a good deal more sorry for himself. He related how he had been drawn into unforeseen expenditure, not stating in so many words, but allowing it to be inferred, that his wife had cost him a good deal more money than an economical manager would have done ; he owned that he had been silly enough to back horses and that he had been even more ill-advised in endeavouring to recover his losses through speculations on the Stock Exchange ; finally, he asked Matthew, as a reasonable, sensible man, what the dickens he was to do.

'The Jews are no good ; I've raised all I can on mortgages, and it's impossible to give them the security they ask for. As for applying to Uncle Richard, that would be simply suicidal. I know as well as possible what he would do : he would pay up, cut me out of his will and wish me good morning. There's Bannock, who isn't a bad fellow ; but he would see me jolly well hanged before he would lend me as much as I must have if I'm to tide over another year. So, you see, it just comes to this : if you're enough of a Cræsus to advance me the amount, you'll be the salvation of me, and you won't really run any risk to speak of. I shall be able to pay you back, with interest, as soon as

the old man dies, and he is failing fast. You must have noticed that yourself.'

'What is the amount?' asked Matthew.

'I know you think me rather a brute for talking in this way; but I should be an utter humbug if I pretended to have any affection for my uncle. He is only glad to see me now because he is rubbing his hands with glee at the thought that I have come to ask for money. If you can be fond of a man who exults over you when you are in trouble, I can't. I shall be rich when he dies; I want very badly to be rich, and I no more want his society than he wants mine. You must remember that he has never been a bit like a father to me and that he has never shown me the slightest kindness or sympathy in my life.'

'I can understand your having no great love for Mr Litton,' said Matthew. 'My own belief is that he is much fonder of you than you suppose or than he cares to show; but never mind that now. The question is whether I can help you. How much do you require?'

Leonard heaved a profound sigh.

'My dear old man,' he answered, 'if you can't manage it without putting yourself to great inconvenience, you mustn't mind saying so. It does sound a lot; but I'm afraid it must be that or nothing. The only thing is that of course you may get it back again within a few months, and you're quite certain of getting it back soon.'

'Unless your uncle disinherits you,' observed Matthew, smiling. 'But would you mind telling me how much it is?'

Leonard paused for a moment before replying to this third

query. Then, with the air of one who gulps down a dose of castor-oil, he brought out his answer.

‘It’s—it’s ten thousand pounds.’

Matthew’s jaw dropped.

‘Ten thousand ! I didn’t think you would want so much as that.’

‘I don’t see how I can do with less,’ answered Leonard sorrowfully ; ‘I have had such ghastly bad luck ! Even if I said eight thousand, it wouldn’t make much difference, I suppose.’

‘Not very much. Well, I must think it over, and I will let you know to-morrow whether it is in my power or not to raise so large a sum. You wouldn’t allow me to lay the whole case before your uncle and hear what he says about it, would you ?’

‘Not for the world !—there can’t be a shadow of a doubt that he would jump at that excuse for altering his will. As it is, he couldn’t, with any sort of decency, disinherit me. I needn’t tell you that we are going to cut down all unnecessary expenses. I shall let Stanwick again as soon as I can find a tenant, and we are looking out for a cheap little house in London. How my wife will stand poverty I’m sure I don’t know ; but we must hope that the ordeal won’t last long. If you could by any possibility—’

‘I will if I can,’ interrupted Matthew a little curtly. ‘More than that I cannot say just now. And indeed,’ he added, glancing at his watch and smiling again, ‘I haven’t time to say more. Go away, and let me see you to-morrow about the same hour. No ; I haven’t earned any thanks yet, and I don’t want

any apologies. You pay me a compliment by coming to me in your trouble.'

But Leonard, while he was being gently pushed towards the door, could not help ejaculating :

'What a good fellow you are, Austin ! I don't believe there ever has been such another good fellow since the world began !'

Evidently, he already felt sure of his ten thousand pounds.

CHAPTER IV

A CHANGE OF QUARTERS

TEN thousand pounds is a large sum of money either to lend or to give away, and all sensible men who have reached a certain age have learnt that what they cannot afford to give away they cannot afford to lend. Matthew Austin, who perhaps scarcely deserved to be called a sensible man, had at all events sense enough to know that much ; so he looked into his affairs with a view to ascertaining whether he could possibly come to his friend's rescue. He found that the requisite amount could be realised, a corresponding curtailment of his income being the necessary consequence ; he found also that he had hitherto, in his careless way, been living very nearly up to the edge of his income and that he must live very differently henceforth or else decline to assist a man who when all was said, had absolutely no claim upon him. To count upon repayment within a year, or two years, or five years, would be obviously imprudent.

Now, whether it is prudent or imprudent, wise or unwise, to cripple your resources and incur extreme discomfort and inconvenience for the sake of somebody else is a question which every man must answer in accordance with his own ideas, and which, of course, depends very much upon the

further question of who somebody else may be. That Matthew, in deciding, towards the small hours of the morning, to make a great sacrifice for the sake of Leonard Jerome, showed himself exceptionally foolish as well as exceptionally generous his biographer, for one, is not concerned to deny; but he did so decide, and having made up his mind, he cheerfully went to sleep. He was fond of Leonard, whom he had always regarded as being to a large extent the victim of circumstances; he could not help believing that the woman whom he had once loved had been chiefly to blame for the embarrassments of which he had been told; he guessed that something worse than a pecuniary catastrophe might be the result of his refusal to assist the improvident couple; and, after all, does not a lonely man get more personal satisfaction out of promoting the happiness of others than out of surrounding himself with luxuries which there is nobody to share?

The upshot of these nocturnal reflections was that at an early hour the next morning Matthew called upon Mr Robinson, the local house-agent, in order to make a proposition which was instantly and favourably received.

'Oh, dear me, no, sir!—not the smallest difficulty,' Mr Robinson replied. 'With the place filling up as it is, we don't 'ardly know where to turn for the accommodation we're asked for. There was a party come in on'y yesterday afternoon—Mr Cohen, a wealthy Jewish gentleman—as I believe your 'ouse would just suit. Invalid lady, no children, what I should term desirable tenants in all respects. I understand as he would bind himself for three months certain, and leavin' of the

'ouse, as you propose to do, sir, with plate, linen and servants, I shouldn't 'esitate for to ask fifteen guineas a week. I 'ope this don't mean we're going to lose you, though, Mr Austin.'

'No; but for various reasons I think of taking lodgings for the rest of the winter,' answered Matthew; and, after having given permission for Mr Cohen to 'view the premises' in the course of the afternoon, he went his way.

Within an hour from the time of his return home that evening the whole transaction had been completed. Mr Cohen had come, had seen and had been conquered; the lamentations and the amazed queries of the servants had been dealt with; nothing remained to be done, except to pack up. So simply and speedily can the greatest changes be effected by one who knows his own mind and has only himself to consult.

But when Leonard, looking half-expectant, half-apprehensive, made his appearance, not a word was said to him upon the subject of the proposed flitting. It is not customary, on making a present, to state the exact price thereof to the recipient, nor had Matthew any inclination to confess how his heart sank at the thought of parting with his privacy, his snug library, his books, his pictures and the garden that he loved. *Linquenda domus!* a persistent voice had been whispering in his ear all day; though he had chosen to speak to the house-agent and the servants of vacating his present quarters for a few months only, he knew very well that his chances of returning thither in the spring were but small. Heedless as he was in matters of domestic economy, he had a horror of debt and greatly preferred being uncomfortable to living beyond his means. At the

same time, he thoroughly disliked being uncomfortable ; besides which, he had grown attached to the pretty old house which he hardly expected ever to inhabit again. However, it would have been the extremity of bad taste to impart these melancholy anticipations to Leonard, whose gratitude was voluble and who wished most particularly to be assured that he was not subjecting his preserver to even a temporary pinch.

‘It’s all right, my dear fellow,’ Matthew declared ; ‘I would do a great deal more than this for you, if I could. Only, since you are pleased to consider yourself beholden to me, I will ask two small favours of you, by way of return.’

‘As many as you like !’ answered Leonard generously.

‘I’ll limit myself to two. The first is that you will have patience with your uncle, who is trying, I admit, but who is fond of you at the bottom of his heart ; the second is that you won’t treat your wife with a show of indifference. If I know anything of her—but perhaps you will say that I don’t know much—she has very strong affections, and it would be better both for her and for you that she should be scolded than that she should be allowed to think you didn’t care what she did. Now I have been impertinent enough and I will say no more.’

Leonard shrugged his shoulders.

‘I can easily promise to be patient with Uncle Richard,’ he answered ; ‘to the best of my knowledge and belief, I have never been anything else. As for Lil—well, you may know her better than I do, but she doesn’t strike me as being the sort of person who would stand much scolding. I have remonstrated with her once or twice upon the subject of

expense, and the result was not encouraging. The fact is that she can't be happy without a grievance, and just now her grievance is that I haven't rent my clothes and heaped dust upon my head because poor old Lady Sara has joined the majority—which is really rather ridiculous. Women often are like that, you know ; the only thing to be done with them is to let them alone until they recover themselves.'

Matthew did not like to warn this easy-going husband that when women are denied sympathy in one quarter they are only too apt to seek it in another. It was not his business to stir up conjugal suspicions and dissensions ; nor indeed was he acquainted with the rights of the case. He thought, not without reason, that he had done what in him lay to help them both ; if he could be of any further use to either of them, he would doubtless be informed of it.

Fortunately for Matthew, it had of late years become no uncommon thing for the Wilverton residents to turn an honest penny by letting their houses during the winter months. It was, to be sure, usual for those who adopted this plan to leave the place on being ousted from their several abodes ; still a bachelor really does not require a whole house to himself, while a doctor cannot, of course, take a holiday at the busiest season of the year ; so Mrs Jennings and others had nothing much worse to say about Mr Austin's removal to Lady Sara's former lodgings in Prospect Place than that the young man's practice was evidently not quite such a lucrative one as some people had seen fit to make out. But Mr Litton at once smelt a rat.

‘What does this mean, Austin?’ he asked sharply one day. ‘You are not the man to turn yourself out of house and home for the sake of making a miserable little profit of a few guineas a week, and although you may be the sort of man to have lost money through some silly investment, I shall not believe that you have done that until you tell me that you have. Is it so?’

‘Well, since you ask me,’ replied Matthew, who congratulated himself upon being able to tell the truth without letting the truth be known, ‘I have made an investment which, I am afraid, may involve the loss of the principal. If the worst comes to the worst, I shall not be ruined; but I thought it prudent to economise, and as I had a good offer for my house I accepted it.’

‘H’m!—very laudable, that decision of yours, but rather sudden, wasn’t it?’ asked the old man, staring steadily at the other. ‘You seem to have formed it just about the time when I was honoured by a visit from my nephew, who gave me to understand that he also would have to practise economy. He came here with an uncommonly long face, and left with a cheerful one, though he got nothing out of me,’ added Mr Litton, smiling grimly.

‘If I were you, I should give him money,’ said Matthew, ignoring the unspoken query. ‘Why don’t you? You have more money than you can spend; you know it is a hard matter for him to pay his way; you mean, I presume, to leave your property to him; yet, instead of giving yourself the satisfaction of being thanked and of seeing other people enjoy themselves,

you prefer to make them look forward to your death. It is very bad policy.'

'Oh, he looks forward to my death, does he?'

It stands to reason that he must; you would look forward to his if your positions were reversed.'

'I suppose I should,' agreed Mr Litton, with a sigh. He had grown accustomed to Matthew's habit of frank speech, and now rather liked it. 'Well,' he resumed presently, 'anyone who is waiting for my death will not have to wait much longer; the finish is in sight now.'

'I doubt whether you are as ill as you think you are,' Matthew began; 'if you would be advised by me—'

'Not for the world!' interrupted Mr Litton; 'please allow Jennings to kill me in his own way. My dear friend, wasn't it agreed between us at the outset that you should never be my medical adviser? And don't you know what the consequences are of mentioning one's medical adviser in one's will? I may want to leave you a trifle; and in point of fact, I believe I shall—particularly now that I have heard of this unfortunate investment of yours.'

'It wasn't exactly medical advice that I was going to offer you,' answered Matthew, laughing. 'As for mentioning me in your will, it is very kind and good of you to contemplate that; but I can say truthfully that I would rather have your society than any legacy. You called me your dear friend just now. That was a way of speaking, of course; still, we really are friends, and I don't think either you or I have so many friends in the world that we can afford to lose one.'

‘Ah, well, you will have to get on as best you can without me soon, and a modest legacy may help you to bear up under the affliction,’ returned Mr Litton, who was probably a little touched and therefore spoke the more drily. ‘Rubbish about your having few friends! I never met a man who had more of them. I am very nearly, if not totally, friendless, I admit; but I have only myself to thank for that. The truth is that I have always known my fellow-mortals too well to make—“unfortunate investments” was the term that we selected, I think.’

It was little enough that the poor old hermit knew about his fellow-mortals; but, like the generality of us, he plumed himself upon what he did not possess, and it would have been a difficult task to persuade him that his judgment had been at fault with regard to his nephew. Matthew made no further effort in that direction, being indeed thankful to be spared awkward questions, and he noted with satisfaction that Mr Litton had not denied the intention imputed to him of constituting Leonard his heir.

It was not long after this that, dropping in at the local pastry-cook’s one day to swallow a hasty luncheon (for the landlady in Prospect Place had told him plainly that she could not put up with irregular hours) he was hailed by a couple of fresh young voices, and turned round to shake the extended hands of Dick and Maggie Frere, who were seated at a little round table, with hot jelly and buns before them. Dick had ‘gone into tails,’ and was quite a young man; so he thought it necessary to explain that he was treating his sister, whose juvenile taste for sweet things remained unimpaired. A recriminatory wrangle

followed ; after which Matthew, who did not feel quite equal to hot jelly, but declared himself capable of eating buns against anybody, drew up a chair between his young friends and inquired how they all were at home.

‘Oh, there has been a nice row in the house!’ answered Dick, with his mouth full. ‘What do you think of Anne’s having refused old Baxendale? Don’t make faces at me, Maggie; you ain’t good-looking enough to play tricks with your features, and the mater would have told Mr Austin all about it if I hadn’t. Yes; the old boy proposed the other day, but she said it wasn’t good enough, and, as you may imagine, her papa and mamma ain’t best pleased with her. I’m not sure, you know,’ continued Dick judicially, ‘that, if I were Anne, I should be particularly keen about marrying a grey-headed old chap like Baxendale; still, she ought to consider her family, and, as the governor says, she needn’t have raised our hopes all this time if she didn’t mean business. No better covert-shooting in England, you know, unless it’s in Norfolk.’

‘I’ve said all along,’ observed Maggie, ‘and I stick to it still, that Anne ought to have married Mr Austin.’

‘How could she, you great silly, when he never asked her? Besides, what this family wants is hard cash. We ain’t proud; we wouldn’t turn up our noses at a retired pork-butcher now, if he had ten or twelve thousand a year to offer. However, there’s no shutting our eyes to the fact that our dear Anne is no longer as young as she was. We shall soon have to look to you for salvation, Maggie.’

‘*I’m* not going to marry a pork-butcher; but if I did, I

wouldn't give anything to a lazy boy like you, except a pound of sausages every now and then to stop his mouth,' returned Maggie. 'As soon as I am old enough I mean to propose to Mr Austin; that will be the next best thing to having him for a brother-in-law.'

'Let us regard the matter as settled, then, subject to the approval of your parents,' said Matthew. 'Any reparation that I can make for having disappointed you by failing to marry your sister—'

He stopped short in the middle of his sentence, looking extremely foolish; for Anne herself had stepped quietly into the shop while he had been speaking, and now stood at his elbow. She could not possibly have helped overhearing his ill-timed jocularly, nor could he do anything except stare at her in mute consternation. Dick and Maggie burst out into shouts of unfeeling laughter at the sight of their friend's discomfiture; but Anne's countenance betrayed neither anger nor amusement.

'Are you encouraging these young wretches to ruin their digestions?' she asked. 'What an unprincipled thing for a doctor to do! I thought I should find them here, and I have come to carry them off home at once. How much unwholesome food have you managed to consume between you, Dick?'

'Impossible to say, upon the spur of the moment,' answered Dick composedly; 'Maggie is such a rapid feeder. But if you will give me ten shillings, my dear, you shall have sixpence change and I'll undertake to pay all expenses.'

There was a little friendly dispute over the payment of the bill, during which Matthew, who insisted upon standing treat for

the whole party, recovered his equanimity to some extent ; but when he found himself out in the street with Anne, the others having rushed off to look on at an incipient dog-fight, he began to feel uncomfortable again. Nor was her first remark of a nature to set him more at his ease.

‘I really think you ought to be ashamed of yourself,’ she said.

‘Because of that nonsense that you heard me talking just now? I am very sorry ; but I assure you it was only the feeblest of feeble jokes, and I should never—’

‘Oh, I know,’ she interrupted. ‘I guessed at once what they had been telling you, and it never occurred to me for a moment to feel annoyed with you for answering Maggie according to her folly. What does make me feel annoyed with you is your having given up your pretty house and gone into stuffy lodgings in order to provide Mr Jerome with ready money which he will only squander. Why should it be more generous to do such things than to give half-a-crown to a tipsy loafer? And we are always being told how immoral it is to do that.’

‘But I can’t admit that I have done anything of the sort,’ said Matthew, to whom this unexpected scolding was not altogether disagreeable.

‘Of course you can’t ; still there is no doubt that you have done it. I have heard from Spencer, who knows how to put two and two together and who perfectly understands why the Jeromes, who were upon the brink of ruin, have been able to make themselves comfortable in London again. If they were worth it, I could keep my patience with you ; but since

they are not, and since you must be aware that they are not—'

'Does one stop to consider whether a drowning man's life is worth saving before one jumps into the water?' asked Matthew.

'You do admit having dragged Mr Jerome out by the hair, then? And do you suppose that he will ever thank you? I always told you that Spencer was not worth much; but I do think he is worth a good deal more than Mr Jerome. At least, he was and is grateful.'

'Besides which, he promptly repaid me. Even if it were the case that I had advanced money to Jerome and had had to let my house for a time in consequence, I should be repaid in one form or another, and the sacrifice wouldn't be such a tremendous one as you imagine. It is my misfortune to be for ever appearing abnormally unselfish when I am simply gratifying my own tastes in my own way.'

'It would be impossible to convince me of that,' answered Anne, shaking her head. 'I know what it is to attempt self-sacrifice for the sake of others, and, as you have heard from the children, I know what it is to break down disgracefully at the last moment. Perhaps that is what makes me find you so exasperating. I was half inclined to read Spencer's letter to you; but I had better not. Since it makes no difference to you whether people are good or bad, grateful or ungrateful, you would hardly be influenced by anything that he might have to say about your friends. Only I do trust that you won't let them reduce you to beggary.'

‘I certainly won’t do that,’ answered Matthew, laughing. ‘Meanwhile, please do not allow it to be supposed that there is the slightest ground for what you have been assuming as a fact.’

‘Oh, nobody in the place, except myself, suspects the truth, if that is what you mean, and nobody will be told by me. I like you too much to exhibit you in the light of—well, in the light in which ninety-nine people out of a hundred would regard your conduct.’

Maggie and Dick returning at this moment in a high state of excitement, after having assisted in dragging the two pugnacious dogs apart, nothing further could be added, and Matthew had no opportunity of telling Miss Frere how glad he had been to hear that she had held out against the fascinations of Sir William Baxendale. But he went his way feeling more cheerful than he had done for a long time past. Anne, to be sure, had not been complimentary; but she had spoken frankly and like a friend—which was more than she had done since his first somewhat unsuccessful efforts to befriend her.

CHAPTER V

THE INTRUSIVE SECRETARY

ALTHOUGH Lilian would not, for choice, have returned to the house in Hans Place which was connected with certain painful memories of hers, yet she was not sorry to find herself once more an inmate of that cosy dwelling ; for indeed she had been threatened with West Brompton or Maida Vale. That her husband had been unfortunate in his speculations she was aware ; but she had neither requested nor been furnished with particulars : all she knew was that Stanwick was to be let, that retrenchment was imperative and that Mr Litton had behaved like 'a regular old brute.' Notwithstanding this alleged avuncular brutality, Leonard had returned from his short visit to Wilverton in greatly improved spirits ; but it had not occurred to her to ascribe this change to Matthew Austin's munificence, of which she had naturally been kept in ignorance.

For her own part, she was perhaps a little less unhappy than she had been during the summer ; for there is nothing, except physical suffering, to which our mortal nature does not grow accustomed with time. The estrangement between her and her husband was now complete and was accepted by each of them as a part of the normal condition of things ; they seldom quarrelled and they did not see nearly as much of one another

in London, where Leonard had his club to go to and his friends to meet, as they had done in the country. Lilian, too, had a few friends, whose society she no longer shirked ; so that their life, as far as its surface was concerned, flowed on smoothly enough through the early months of winter.

But soon after Parliament reassembled a slightly disturbing influence began to ruffle that outward placidity. It was not that Leonard objected in the least to the reappearance of Mr Vawdrey, whom, on the contrary, he was quite pleased to see again ; but Lilian was not free from doubt as to whether—knowing what she knew—she ought to receive him, and the young man himself was so embarrassed and diffident on the occasion of his first visit that she was very nearly asking him not to repeat it. To be sure, he had never made any open declaration, and, in compliance with her request, he had written to her three or four times since his abrupt departure from Stanwick Hall—stiff little letters of the schoolboy order of composition, in which a good deal had been said about politics and something about sport ; letters which might safely have been read in the market-place. Still, since his feelings were evidently unchanged, it might possibly be her duty to be out when he called. All things considered, however, she decided against a course of action which, if adopted, would have deprived her of some pleasant hours. She was in no danger of losing her heart to this perfectly respectful adorer of hers ; she soon perceived that it was not his intention to take any advantage of her leniency, and the more she saw of him the better she liked him. As for him, since he was out of the nursery, she did not consider that

she was bound to protect him against himself ; she had seen too many platonic and quasi-platonic friendships wax and wane to take a very tragic view of their possible results. Moreover, she believed, with reason, that Mr Vawdrey had at least as much common sense as the general run of young men.

Thus it came to pass that in a few weeks' time he had re-established himself upon the old footing. He became as frequent a visitor as of yore ; he gradually dropped the apprehensive tone and the look of mute pleading for pardon which he had assumed at the outset ; he even permitted himself to hint, from time to time, at the deep sympathy which he felt for Lilian, whom he still regarded as an injured and neglected woman. He hinted at nothing more—or, at least, if he did, his hints were so discreet and so faint that they might fairly be looked upon as unintentional.

It was not, therefore, his conduct, nor her own, nor any fear as to the ultimate issue of either that caused those ripples upon the even flow of Lilian's existence to which allusion has been made. What at first displeased and afterwards disquieted her was the persistence of Mr Vawdrey's private secretary in calling at a house to which he had never been invited. That unwelcome personage was never without an excuse for following his chief to Hans Place, and he seldom failed to preface his request for instructions as to the correspondence which he brought in his hand with the remark of, 'I thought I should find you here.' This formula he would accompany with a smile of which Mrs Jerome could not fail to understand the meaning.

'I wish,' she said impatiently to Vawdrey one day, 'that

letters of importance didn't always reach you at such improbable hours! Wouldn't it save your time and Mr Frere's to have them addressed to the House of Commons?'

'Well, it isn't only letters, you see,' answered Vawdrey apologetically. 'All sorts of things keep cropping up, and he is such a scrupulous fellow that he'll do nothing without precise orders.'

'Yes, I should think he was very scrupulous,' observed Lilian drily; 'still he might take some less inconvenient way of displaying his virtues.'

'All right; I'll tell him not to come here again.'

'Oh, you can't do that. It doesn't really matter; only he is rather a bore, and sometimes I think he goes about as near to being impertinent as he dares.'

Vawdrey looked pained and surprised. He was quite sure that poor Frere did not mean to be impertinent; he regretted Mrs Jerome's invincible prejudice against his *protégé*; nothing short of downright proof would have made him believe that Spencer was spying upon them both. But Lilian was under no illusion upon the subject, and if she had known how to make her manner more distant and forbidding than it was when she poured out a cup of tea for the bland intruder she would certainly have done so. The provoking part of it was that Spencer was evidently aware of her displeasure and that he didn't care. There was a tacit enmity between them to which she gave expression as well as she could by supercilious disdain, while he, with considerably greater ingenuity and success, would make smiling insinuations of which it was impossible to take notice. It was not, however, until his fifth or sixth visit that a desire for variety

prompted him to say something amiable about Matthew Austin and the latter's change of abode.

'From what my sister tells me, Austin must have been hit rather hard,' he remarked; 'a man doesn't leave a comfortable house and go into lodgings for pleasure. I wouldn't mind laying ten to one that the poor beggar has either been backing a bill for a friend or lending money which he doesn't expect ever to see again. I wonder which of his friends has lent him a helping hand on the road to ruin this time.'

Lilian, pierced by a sudden, swift suspicion, set down her teacup and changed colour.

'Has Mr Austin left his house?' she faltered. 'I didn't know.'

Spencer gazed steadily at her. 'Is she telling a lie?' he thought. 'She doesn't look as if she was, but of course she must be. Most likely it was she who sent her husband down to Wilverton at a time when, as everybody knew, he was all but broke. Most likely she is getting money out of Vawdrey now.'

'I had no idea that Austin's having let his house for the winter would be news to you,' he said aloud. 'He is popularly supposed to be hard up in consequence of foolish speculations; but it is a good deal more probable, I should imagine, that somebody else has speculated foolishly. How odd that he should never have mentioned it in writing to your husband! But perhaps, as you are such friends, he was afraid of distressing you.'

For two days Lilian kept her doubts and fears to herself. What Spencer Frere had intended her to understand was obvious;

still she clung to the hope that he had spoken as he had done out of sheer malevolence and that she had been spared the crowning humiliation of being pecuniarily indebted to the man whose love she had at first accepted and had then thrown away. She dreaded, too, a scene with Leonard, who hated nothing so much as being questioned about the state of his affairs. Finally, she had a little of that cowardly inclination to shut her eyes in the presence of unwelcome facts to which few of us can pretend to be total strangers. So long as the shadow of a doubt exists, why should we not allow ourselves the benefit of it? But we always have to open our eyes eventually, and on the third day Lilian realised, as everybody must end by realising, that however bad a thing certainty may be, it is more tolerable than suspense.

Leonard, for a wonder, was eating his luncheon at home. He lingered on to smoke a cigarette or two after the conclusion of that meal and, being in a good humour, chatted pleasantly to his wife, without noticing her preoccupied mien. He was quite taken aback when she said abruptly :

‘I want to ask you something. You told me in the autumn, you know, that you had had losses and that we should have to live in a very small way for some time to come. Then you took this house again and money seemed to become plentiful. Where did it come from?’

‘I really can’t undertake to explain business transactions which you wouldn’t understand even if they were explained to you,’ answered Leonard, his face clouding over.

‘I don’t want to hear anything about business transactions ;

all I want to know is whether you have borrowed money from Matthew Austin.'

'What put that idea into your head?' asked Leonard with a frown.

'He has let his house and he is said to be in difficulties. That man Frere told me about it the other day. Did you know that he had let his house?'

As a matter of fact, Leonard, who occasionally wrote to one of Mr Litton's old servants in order to keep himself informed as to the condition of his uncle's health, had heard of the circumstance alluded to and had been not a little provoked by it. Such ostentatious measures of precaution on Austin's part were surely uncalled for, seeing that in a few months' time his ten thousand pounds would be safely lodged at his banker's once more. That sort of conduct was just the sort of thing to set people chattering and guessing, and here was the disagreeable proof that it had had that effect. Really, Austin might have been a little more considerate.

'I suppose Austin is entitled to let his house, if he likes,' he replied curtly. 'Perhaps you will even admit that I am entitled to manage my own affairs without being cross-examined about them.'

'Ah, then it is true!' exclaimed Lilian, clasping her hands despairingly. 'No; you are *not* entitled to manage your affairs in that way! How can you have fallen so low as to take money from him, of all men in the world?—and money which he could not spare, too! Don't you understand that it is to me, not to you, that he is lending it? No; you are not entitled to degrade me as you have done!'

The retort was too easy and too obvious to be resisted.

‘Your qualms of conscience do you credit, my dear,’ answered Leonard, with a smile, ‘but I think you may safely dismiss them. If Austin was enamoured of you once upon a time—which I take leave to doubt—he has assuredly overcome that weakness now, and I have every reason to believe that he has a sincere liking for me, unworthy though I may be of his regard.’

‘Put it in that way, if you choose,’ returned Lilian impatiently; ‘it makes no difference whether he has done this for you or for me.’

‘Oh, I thought your argument was that it made all the difference.’

‘I am not arguing; all I want you to see is that it is disgraceful for us to have reduced him to poverty in order that we may live comfortably. You yourself must feel that it is, and so must he. His being too generous to say so doesn’t make our disgrace any the less. Oh, I wish I had married him!’

‘Permit me respectfully to echo that wish,’ returned Leonard, whose face was white and who, in truth, was very angry indeed. ‘As, however, you have made the mistake of marrying me, I must beg you to understand, once for all, that I claim to be master of my own actions. Of course you are talking absolute nonsense when you accuse me of having reduced Austin to poverty, and I take it that he would hardly have obliged me with a small loan, which I am sure of paying back within a few months, if he had been compelled to let his house on that account. But I don’t consider myself in any way bound to plead guilty or not guilty to you. It seems pretty clear by this

time that, whatever I do or leave undone, I shall never succeed in pleasing you, and as I allow you to take your own line, you had better allow me to take mine. If we can't be an affectionate couple, let us at least endeavour to treat one another with decent civility when we meet. I assure you that our meetings shall be as few as I can make them.'

About two hours later, Mr Vawdrey, whom a swift hansom had brought from Westminster in time to beg for the cup of tea with which Mrs Jerome was wont to refresh him when he could escape from his legislative functions, was thrown into a state of much mental agitation by the sight of Lilian's red and swollen eyelids.

'What has happened?' he asked anxiously. 'Is it—has he—?'

When the male friend of any married woman takes to speaking to her of her husband by the pronoun of the third person, it behoves her to consider whether friendship can be kept up any longer without peril; but Lilian was too full of her own woes to remember anything except that this good, honest, sympathetic fellow would be upon her side if he knew the whole truth, and her inclination was strong to tell him the whole truth then and there. She stopped short of doing that, although it would have been scarcely more imprudent to state the facts than to answer as she did.

'He hasn't been beating me, if that is what you mean,' she replied, laughing rather hysterically. 'Only I don't feel as if I *could* go on living with him!'

Further questions failed to elicit anything much more

definite than that from her ; but Vawdrey felt convinced that she would never have said as much, had she not been subjected to the most extreme provocation, and his wrath was equalled only by his sense of helplessness. What could he do or say to console her? There were several things which he would have dearly loved to say and several which he would have rejoiced to do ; but, for reasons which it would be superfluous to specify, one and all of them were inadmissible. As a matter of fact, he said very little and looked a good deal. Perhaps she understood him ; he had, at any rate, the comfort of believing that she did.

However that may have been, it did not take her very long to repent of her impulsive denunciation of Leonard and to realise that it had been unwise as well as undignified.

‘Oh, no, I did not really mean that,’ she said, in answer to a preposterous suggestion on Vawdrey’s part. ‘Of course I cannot leave my husband ; and even if I could, your mother would be rather astonished, I think, at being asked to provide a refuge for a total stranger. You must not take me so literally.’

‘I take it that you were speaking the truth when you said that you felt as if you could not live with him any longer,’ answered Vawdrey sorrowfully. ‘I don’t know what he has done to-day, and I won’t go on asking you ; but I have seen enough for myself to know what a br— what a wretched life you have with him. It seems very unfair that marriages can’t be annulled when they turn out badly.’

‘I suppose it would lead to all sorts of awkward complications if they could. At any rate, when one has been disappointed, one ought to have self-respect enough to conceal one’s disappoint-

ment. You are full of kindness and commiseration, I know, but I suspect that at the bottom of your heart you despise me a little for telling you things which I should have done better to keep to myself.'

'You have told me nothing !' exclaimed Vawdrey. 'My own eyes and ears have told me a great deal more than you have ever confessed. Despise you indeed !—ah, if you only knew—'

He did not finish his sentence, instruction in the art of public speaking having failed to supply him with that gift of eloquence which is the birthright of more fortunate men ; but he stretched out his hand to clasp hers, as the habit of the average mute Briton is, when strongly moved. And it was in this affectionate posture that Spencer Frere, bustling into the room with his usual equipment of letters and telegrams, surprised the pair.

The private secretary's smile was so undisguised and so significant that even Vawdrey, who liked the man, lost his temper for once.

'Confound it all, Frere !' he was foolish enough to exclaim, 'can't you leave a man in peace for an hour? I'm not the Prime Minister, and my correspondents aren't people of such tremendous importance that you might not have ventured to answer them upon your own responsibility.'

'Very sorry to be so intrusive,' returned Spencer inexorably, 'but there are one or two letters here which I shouldn't have known how to answer without being told. I don't know what your engagements are, you see, and if I had committed you for

next Wednesday evening, when you may have promised to dine with somebody—with Mrs Jerome, for instance—you wouldn't have liked it.'

'Oh, well, hand them over, then,' said Vawdrey, snatching the sheaf of papers impatiently out of the other's hand. 'I have got to go back to the House almost immediately and I can read this stuff on the way.'

He was annoyed with Frere for having caught him in a compromising attitude, and still more annoyed with himself for having made matters ten times worse by exhibiting his annoyance. He thought the best thing he could do now was to take himself off; so he beat a somewhat precipitate retreat. Spencer lingered behind him just long enough to say politely to Mrs Jerome,—

'Please accept my humblest apologies. How you must hate me! But then you were not precisely devoted to me before, were you?'

CHAPTER VI

SPENCER INTERVENES

VAWDREY did not see his too officious secretary again that day. He was detained until a late hour at the House of Commons, where he dined, and when he returned to the spacious dwelling in Dover Street which he had taken for six months, in the hope of inducing his mother and his sisters join him later in the year, Frere was either out or had gone to bed. But they met at breakfast the next morning, when Spencer at once remarked :

‘You look uncommonly glum, and I fancy I can guess the reason why. If I know anything of women, you have just received a letter from our friend Mrs Jerome, calling me every sort of bad name for having broken in upon that interesting conversation of yours yesterday and suggesting that I did it on purpose.’

‘Perhaps you don’t know quite as much of women as you imagine,’ answered Vawdrey shortly. ‘Anyhow, I have not heard from Mrs Jerome, and if I had I don’t suppose that she would have mentioned you or complained of your bouncing into her drawing-room “on purpose,” whatever you may mean by that.’

‘Oh, she might have accused me of doing it on purpose and

told no lie. I don't mind owning that I have been keeping my little eye upon you both for some time past. Now, look here, Vawdrey; I'm a good bit older than you are, and I've seen a lot more than you have. Be advised by me, and don't let that woman make a fool of you.'

Vawdrey was one of the most modest, tolerant and good-tempered of men; but there were limits to his forbearance, and his blue eyes flashed as he said:

'I can't stand this sort of thing, Frere. You mean well, I have no doubt, but your experience of women, if you'll excuse my saying so, hasn't been exactly an experience of ladies, and you don't seem to understand how a lady feels. In future—'

'I understand what it means when I see a man and a woman holding each other's hands and sitting so close together that their noses almost touch, anyhow,' interrupted Spencer, with a laugh.

'I was going to say,' continued Vawdrey, keeping his temper, 'that in future, if you please, we will not mention Mrs Jerome's name and that I don't wish you to follow me to Hans Place again.'

'Oh, all right; of course you're master and I'm only servant. Don't say I didn't warn you, that's all. You will be the second good fellow of my acquaintance whom she has played the deuce with. Austin isn't so much to be pitied. It was pretty bad form to engage herself to him and then throw him over at the last moment because she had taken a fancy to Jerome; still, he would have been even worse off if she had married him. But when you have figured as co-respondent in the Divorce Court,

and have "made the only reparation in your power," and so forth and so forth, you won't much relish her taking a fancy to somebody else—which she is certain to do.'

'I think you had better stop there,' said Vawdrey, with ominous calmness, as he rose from the breakfast table. 'I can't allow you, or anybody, to speak of Mrs Jerome in that way.'

'My dear man,' returned the other contemptuously, 'this is a free country, and if I choose to express my opinions, I don't know who is going to stop me. My opinion of Mrs Jerome is—'

But Spencer's opinion of Mrs Jerome was stated in terms too crude to be acceptable to the general reader. They were so far from being acceptable to Mr Vawdrey that he was in two minds about taking off his coat and requesting his secretary to do the same. As a preliminary measure, however, he only said quietly :

'That is a lie, and you know it.'

Spencer got up slowly and stood, looking into the other's eyes. A liar he might be, but he had never been a physical coward ; and indeed, if he and his late superior officer had set to work with their fists then and there, it is by no means certain that he would have had the worst of the encounter. But, not being particularly angry, he saw the absurdity of resorting to fisticuffs. The teacups would be upset, the servants would rush in, the combatants would be dragged apart, one or other of them with a black eye perhaps ; possibly a policeman would be called in—there is no method, in these days, of avenging insults which can only be wiped out with blood.

'I daresay you know that I am not afraid of you,' he said at

length ; 'to tell you the truth, I don't much care whether you know it or not. You have been a good friend to me, Vawdrey, and I'm sorry, both for your sake and my own—especially for my own—that we have got to part now ; but of course, after what you have said, I can't stay any longer in this house ; so I'll just pack up my things and send for a cab.'

Thus, not without a touch of dignity, Spencer Frere made his exit. He may have expected to be recalled and he may have been willing to accept an apology ; but neither recall nor apology was vouchsafed to him in the course of the next hour and a half. Just before he left the house, the butler handed him a sealed envelope which, on being opened, was found to contain a cheque for a quarter's salary. This he pocketed, together with his pride (alas ! he had learnt long ago how to pocket the latter), and went his way.

He told the cabman to drive to an hotel in Jermyn Street that he knew of and, having secured a bedroom, sat him down to think. It was not upon the uncertainty of his own prospects that he meditated. It had never been his custom to look far ahead ; he had money enough to meet immediate requirements ; he presumed that, if the worst came to the worst, his wife would have to keep him out of the workhouse, and he was rather glad than otherwise to be relieved from the constraint of duties which he had not found congenial. The question which preoccupied him, as he sat in that shabby little room, with his elbows on his knees, was how he might best pay Mrs Jerome out : assuredly he did not mean to let her march off from the field of battle with bands playing and colours flying. In the composition of

Spencer Frere's not very estimable character personal vanity played a leading part, and Lilian from the very first had contrived to wound him in that vulnerable spot. Ridiculous though it may seem, he was wont to regard himself as irresistible, and a woman who treated him with disdain was a woman whom he could not by any possibility pardon. For the rest, it must be said that he honestly believed Lilian to be what he had called her, that he liked and admired Matthew Austin more than any other man in the world and that he was not altogether ungrateful to Vawdrey, whom he took to be a good-natured sort of fool. He had, therefore, some plausible reasons, as well as some bad ones, for determining, as he did, to 'put a spoke in Mrs J.'s wheel.'

Early in the afternoon, Leonard, emerging from the club in Pall Mall where he had been lunching, was accosted by a gentleman whose society he did not especially covet, but who walked along the street with him, talking about the Liverpool Spring Meeting, and whom he had not the incivility to shake off at once.

'It's little enough that I see of racing nowadays,' Spencer remarked with a sigh, when his companion paused at the corner by Marlborough House. 'You're a lucky man not to be a member of Parliament, and the next worst thing to being a member is to be a member's secretary, I can tell you! As for my revered chief, most of my time is spent in hunting for him. Though, to be sure,' added Spencer, laughing, 'I have found out by this time that there is one covert which is pretty safe not to be drawn blank. The only trouble is that when I do draw Hans Place, as in duty bound, I generally get cursed for my pains. I

wish you would represent to Mrs Jerome that the Government Whips are losing all patience with her.'

Leonard might have rejoined that his personal feelings enabled him to associate himself unreservedly with those attributed to the Government Whips ; but, being a little irritated by the other's impudent tone, he said stiffly :

'I am sorry to hear that my wife's name has been made free with in the way that you describe.'

'Oh, it's only chaff,' Spencer returned, with easy good humour ; 'everybody—or at least everybody whose opinion is worth a second thought—knows that it's all right and that you don't mind. Why should you ? They only call Vawdrey Mrs Jerome's poodle-dog to get a rise out of him.'

'I didn't know that they called him by that name,' said Leonard ; 'thanks for telling me. Good morning !'

'I think,' said Spencer complacently to himself, as he watched Leonard's tall figure striding westwards, 'that that will about do. I haven't committed myself to any assertion that can be disproved, but I have made him feel like a fool. He is going straight home to give his wife a bad quarter of an hour, the upshot of which will be that she will have to abandon her friend or arrange clandestine meetings with him. Unless I am very much mistaken in Vawdrey, that last suggestion will open his eyes, and unless I am very much mistaken in Mrs Jerome, she will make it. You didn't know your man when you mounted the high horse with me, my dear madam.'

Leonard, it is scarcely necessary to say, proceeded forthwith to play the part assigned to him in this far-sighted plot. He

found Lilian in the drawing-room when he reached home. She was sitting, as usual, with a novel upon her knees, which she was not reading, and although this was the first time that they had met that day, he vouchsafed her no sort of greeting.

‘I am sorry to be obliged to say,’ he began, without preface, ‘that I must ask you to cease receiving Mr Vawdrey when I am out. I believe we agreed yesterday to interfere with one another as little as possible for the future ; but I daresay you will admit that, so long as we continue to live together, it will be necessary for me to impose certain restrictions upon you. Perhaps you will also admit that I have been tolerably forbearing so far.’

‘Do you mean that you have become jealous of Mr Vawdrey all of a sudden?’ asked Lilian, gazing at him with cold indifference.

‘Oh, dear, no ; jealousy implies love, I suppose, and there isn’t much love lost between you and me, is there? No, if I had been inclined to be jealous, I should have indulged in that luxury some months ago, when my sister was kind enough to caution me against inviting such a gay Lothario to the house. I am not in the least jealous ; my private opinion is that you haven’t it in you to care a brass farthing for Vawdrey or for anybody else, except yourself. At the same time, since you bear my name and are nominally my wife, I feel bound to take some care of your reputation.’

It would have been difficult to condense a greater number of cruel words into one short sentence : no man, probably, would have spoken with equal cruelty to a woman whom he had altogether ceased to love. But Lilian, naturally, was not cool enough to make that philosophic reflection.

‘My reputation!’ she exclaimed, starting to her feet, while her lips quivered with anger. ‘Do you—*you* of all people!—dare to accuse me of—’

‘I accuse you of nothing,’ interrupted Leonard calmly, ‘except imprudence. Please, let us avoid melodrama, if we can. I have told you already that I haven’t the vanity or the humility—I really don’t know which it ought to be called—to be jealous of Vawdrey; only, since it has come to my knowledge that his friends laugh at him for being tied to your apron-strings, I think the moment has arrived for me to say that they must find some new joke.’

‘His friends?—what friends?’ asked Lilian, thinking at once of Spencer Frere.

Leonard shrugged his shoulders.

‘All of them, I daresay,’ he answered. ‘You know—or possibly you don’t know—that when one man says a thing of that sort in a club, a whole flock of geese follow suit, and the House of Commons, so far as he and the members whom he mixes with are concerned, is to all intents and purposes a club.’

‘It seems to me,’ observed Lilian, who had calmed down and had resumed her seat, ‘that you might very well have said all this without insulting me.’

‘And it seems to me,’ returned Leonard, ‘that you might have said what you had to say yesterday afternoon without insulting me. However, we won’t renew that discussion. May I trust you to convey the necessary hint to Vawdrey without insulting him? It would be better that the hint should come

from you than from me ; but your methods are so peculiar that I will undertake the task, if you don't feel equal to it.'

'Clumsy as I am, I don't see how I could manage to insult him in this instance,' answered Lilian. 'I suppose what you wish me to say is that you have no personal objection to his visits, but that, as his friends have been laughing at him, and perhaps at you into the bargain, you would be obliged if he did not come to the house again without a formal invitation.'

'Yes, that is near enough,' said Leonard ; and, after a momentary hesitation, he withdrew, leaving his wife with a strong impression upon her mind that his previous assertions had been made merely with the object of depriving her of her one friend.

Rather to her surprise, and perhaps also a little to her disappointment, Vawdrey did not call on that or on either of the two succeeding days, the fact being that his conscience compelled him to fulfil those duties which he had been so wantonly and unfairly accused of neglecting. If the Junior Lords of the Treasury had had no member more recalcitrant than Mr Vawdrey to deal with, their task would indeed have been a sinecure. But on Sunday the whips cease from troubling, and on Sunday the jaded representative of the mid-division of his native county betook himself joyfully to Hans Place.

'Well, I've got rid of Frere,' was almost the first thing that he said ; 'I'm sure you'll be glad to hear that. In a way, I'm rather sorry to have had to abandon him to his fate ; still I must confess that I have rather come round to your opinion about him.'

Lilian displayed less interest in this piece of news than she had been expected to do. What, after all, did it matter to her whether Mr Vawdrey retained or dismissed his private secretary, since Mr Vawdrey's own dismissal must presently be pronounced?

'Have you and he quarrelled?' she asked languidly.

'I don't know whether you could call it exactly a quarrel. We should speak if we met, I suppose, and if I could be of use to him, I would; but the truth is that he cheeked me in a way that I couldn't stand, and as he resigned his berth without apologising, there was nothing for it but to let him go. For all that, I shouldn't wonder if he meant well.'

'I shouldn't wonder if he meant well to you, but it is not very likely that he meant well to me. I suppose, when you say that he cheeked you, you mean that he said something about your coming here so often.'

'It doesn't signify what he said.'

'Not very much—especially as other people seem to have been saying the same thing. I don't know why it should be thought impossible for a young married woman to have male as well as female friends, but evidently it is, and my husband wants me to tell you that your visits here have been noticed.'

'*Honi soit qui mal y pense!*' cried the young man eagerly. 'Who cares for the lies of a lot of backbiting old cats? Do you?'

'I don't think I care particularly what cats or dogs or any other variety of living creatures may say about me; I don't think I care particularly about anything in the world. But my

husband says he does, and he may be right. Anyhow I must obey his orders.'

'His orders!' echoed Vawdrey ruefully. 'Has he ordered you to cut me, then?'

'Oh, no; he would not ask me to do anything so embarrassing for us all as that would be. Only he wishes me to explain to you, as politely as I can, that I shall not be at home henceforth when you call. Don't put on that face of consternation; you won't suffer from the interdict half as much as I shall. Though I can lay my hand upon my heart and swear that, so far as I am concerned, there was no necessity for it.'

Vawdrey could hardly lay his hand upon his heart and make a similar declaration. What he could say with truth, and did say—knowing all the time that he ought not to use such words—was that this sentence of banishment had fallen upon him like a sentence of death.

'Of course I am nothing to you,' he added, with a touch of bitterness; 'but you are everything to me—everything! What harm was there in my being allowed to see you and talk to you sometimes? If that man cared for you, if he even treated you with common humanity, I shouldn't mind so much—at least, I don't think I should. But when he makes your life miserable, when he goes out of his way to slight you publicly, when he—'

'Don't go on,' interrupted Lilian; 'if you say much more, you will make it impossible for us to meet again even as acquaintances. What you have said, and what I shall forget as

soon as I can, only justifies him. I am very unlucky ; the people whom I like best in the world always seem either to hate me or—'

'Or to love you !'

'Oh, their love doesn't last long. I was going to say that they either hated or misunderstood me.'

'Which did that man Austin do?' asked Vawdrey, with a sudden pang of unreasoning jealousy.

'I don't know ; at present I believe that he does both. But that is just as well. You, at any rate,' added Lilian, with an unmirthful laugh, 'cannot possibly have misunderstood me. I have spoken plainly to you, if I never spoke plainly before in my life. Now go away, and don't bother yourself about me any more.'

So presently Vawdrey left the house, reflecting sadly, as he went, that Mrs Jerome's parting advice had been sound, although it could not be followed. She did not love her husband ; she might or might not love the unknown Austin ; but it was as clear as daylight that she had never loved, and never would love, the forlorn legislator whom she had just sent about his business.

CHAPTER VII

MATTHEW AND HIS FRIENDS

HABIT, at once the blessing and the curse of the human race, reconciles us all to many things which we start by hating—to loss, to penury, to sin, in some measure even, it may be hoped, to physical pain—and Matthew, who had at first felt very miserable and forlorn in his cramped lodgings, became quite attached to them before the winter was over. It is true that he still had to turn his head the other way when he drove past his own gates; it is true that the sight of black-browed Mrs Cohen, issuing forth from them in her showy barouche, still caused him a pang, and that the constant requests of Bush for orders as to this and that connected with the garden depressed him a little. Not for him would those packets of seed break into many coloured parterres; not for him would the roses bloom or the creeping-plants spread themselves over bank and rock. But upon the whole he was not discontented. Very few people who are busy all day long have leisure to be discontented, and although the small amenities and luxuries of life are pleasant, it is wonderful how little they have to do with happiness. Matthew was so fond of pretty things and comfortable surroundings that the fact of his being able to dispense with them was in itself a pleasure to him.

In these days he frequented the Wilverton Club more than of yore, sometimes obtaining there the ridiculously early or preposterously late substitute for dinner with which he could not ask his landlady to provide him, and there he often encountered Mr Frere, whose custom it was to drop in for a rubber of whist or an hour's conversation towards evening. One afternoon in spring the old gentleman met him, as he was entering, and said :

‘You’re the very man I was looking for. I can’t get any sleep at night, and I believe I’ve got a touch of lumbago, and my liver’s all wrong, and in short I want overhauling generally. Couldn’t you come back and dine with us for once? You must eat your dinner somewhere, you know, and I’ll give you a lift out. Mrs Frere would like to see you too. Not that she’s exactly ill; but she wants cheering up, and so do I, goodness knows!’

Indeed, it soon appeared that cheering up, rather than medicine, was what the family chiefly stood in need of. Mr Frere explained, on the way to Hayes Park, what it was that had put his liver out of order and had ruffled the serenity of his wife’s usually equable temper.

‘I’m sure I’m no advocate for forcing girls to marry against their will,’ he grumbled, ‘and when Anne was fool enough to reject Baxendale, not a word did I say, except to tell her that she didn’t seem to know on which side her bread was buttered. But I did think he would have given her a second chance. So did her mother. She kept on saying, “Don’t worry her, George”—as if I ever worried anybody!—“and she will come

round in time." And now hang me if the fellow isn't going to be married at once to some confounded widow or other who has picked him up in London! Upon my word, it's enough to make a bishop blaspheme! And on top of it all I get about a dozen bills from Harry's tradesmen for the deuce knows what rubbish that he ordered before he went to India. I do assure you, Austin, there are moments when I wish I had never had any children at all. Don't tell Mrs Frere that I said so, though; she thinks me unfeeling enough as it is.'

Mrs Frere did not think that, nor in truth was it her wont to ascribe any blame to the peppery little husband who remained her lover after so many years of married life; but Matthew found her more dejected than he had ever seen her before, and it was evident that she did not acquit Anne of unfeeling conduct.

'I can't deny that it is a dreadful disappointment,' she sighed, after Matthew had joined her in the drawing-room, of which she was the sole occupant. 'From what Emma Baxendale said—and Sir William himself!—I did quite hope that he would have been more constant. And the provoking part of it is that Anne is as pleased as possible. She does try to look contrite and submissive; but you know what an unmanageable face she has. From her childhood up she has never been able to deceive an infant. I still believe that if that tiresome man had only had the patience to wait until next summer, she would have yielded. She must have been thinking of yielding, or she wouldn't be so obviously rejoiced now.'

When Anne came in to dinner, her aspect coincided so

amusingly with the description given of it by Mrs Frere that Matthew could not help being tickled, although his sympathies were entirely with the disobedient daughter. The expression of her countenance was akin to that which all butlers must have noticed scores of times upon the features of those to whom they have addressed the welcome formula 'Not at home.' The expectant visitor has done his duty ; it is no fault of his that he is turned away from the door ; he departs rejoicing, but, for the sake of decency, disguises his glee beneath a thin veil of regret. Anne, to be sure, had not quite done her duty ; but possibly she had contemplated doing it under certain contingencies, and now, behold ! the shadow of those impending contingencies had been removed from her path. No wonder she breathed more freely, and no wonder she was anxious to make such amends as she could by dutiful conduct towards the parents whose hopes had been frustrated.

The old people were comically displeased with her, and showed their displeasure by resolutely ignoring the small attentions with which she plied them during dinner. Too kind-hearted to bully or reproach their daughter, they nevertheless felt that such perversity as hers ought not to be allowed to pass wholly unpunished ; so they pretended not to hear when she spoke to them, omitted to thank her for the eagerness with which she anticipated their wants and kept her out of the conversation in a pointed manner.

So little mystery had been made about the whole business that when Matthew approached her at the end of the long drawing-room after dinner, Mr and Mrs Frere having settled

down to a game of *bésique* by the fireside, she said, without any embarrassment :

‘I am in disgrace, you see ; but this time the blame does not lie entirely with me, so that I can’t feel as I did some months ago. Do you think I am a monster of selfishness?’

‘Frightful!’ answered Matthew ; ‘I never heard of a more flagrant case of egoism. How you could hesitate for a moment to provide your parents with a wealthy son-in-law and your brothers with excellent covert-shooting, when all you were asked to do was to put your personal inclinations out of the question, is more than I can understand.’

‘It is all very well to laugh, but you know that if you had been in my place, you would have put your personal inclinations out of the question at once. Well, I can’t help it ; I am not constituted as you are, and I shall never be able to do the heroic things that you do. Is it true that old Mr Litton is dying?’

‘I don’t think so,’ answered Matthew. ‘He seems to me to be growing more feeble and apathetic ; but as far as I know, he may live for some years yet. Why do you ask?’

‘Because I suppose that when he does die, Mr Jerome’s debts will be paid and you will be allowed to go home again.’

‘You choose to assume that Jerome has debts and that the payment of them is some concern of mine,’ remarked Matthew. ‘I never told you that that was the case.’

‘And you never denied it, because you couldn’t tell an untruth. I am not hoping for Mr Litton’s death ; if he can still enjoy life, let him enjoy it as long as possible, poor old

man! But I do hope that he won't disappoint his nephew by leaving all his property to some charity.'

'It is not usual to dispose of a large country house and a considerable landed estate in that way,' answered Matthew, laughing. 'I wish I were as sure of your being a rich woman some day as I am that Leonard Jerome will be a rich man.'

'Why should you wish me to be a rich woman? Am I so much greedier of riches than you are? If I had been—but I am sick of talking about myself and my perverted ideas,' concluded Anne impatiently, as she rose and moved to a seat nearer the bésique-players, by way of putting an end to the conversation.

Now, whether it was desirable or undesirable that Mr Litton's spirit should be released from the prison-house of an ailing body, certain it was that the inhabitants of Wilverton Grange did not expect to keep their master with them much longer. Dr Jennings had told them plainly that the end was in sight; and Matthew himself, who called at the Grange a few days after this, was struck by the old man's pallor and air of exhaustion.

'I am very tired to-day, Austin, Mr Litton said. 'I have been making a fresh will, and making wills is tiring work. Especially when one has no means no knowing whether one has done the right thing or not.'

'Oh, I have no doubt that you have done the right thing,' Matthew declared.

'I don't see how you can be free from doubt about a

matter of which you know nothing. I am not free from doubt, and yet I know as much as I am ever likely to know on this side of the grave. Do you ever hear from Leonard?’

‘Well, no; it is rather a long time since he last wrote to me.’

‘He never writes to me; but I hear things through the servants. He and his wife are living a cat and dog life, I understand. It serves them right; they are only reaping what they have sown, like the rest of us. They wouldn’t get on any better together if they had plenty of money, I suppose.’

‘I don’t know that: most of the quarrels that one hears about are connected more or less directly with money. At all events, the want of it is apt to turn people’s temper sour.’

‘Ah, it cuts both ways; the possession of it doesn’t tend to make a man amiable or to increase his affection for his fellow-men, I assure you. A curious thing is that, little as I care for money and little as it has ever done for me, I don’t half like the thought of handing it over to somebody else. My own wish, I believe, would be to leave this place and a corresponding income to you. Oh, don’t look alarmed; I haven’t done that, and I am not going to do it: eccentricity must have limits. But I would rather think of you as living here than of—than of those who will come after me. What does it matter, when all’s said and done? I shall know nothing about it.’

‘Your best plan,’ returned Matthew cheerfully, ‘is to go on

living here yourself. And there is no reason that I know of why you shouldn't.'

'My dear Austin,' said the old man, straightening himself a little in his chair and gazing with keen, sunken eyes into the other's face, 'do you suppose that I should have acquiesced as I have done in certain transactions which I have not invited you to explain unless I had been perfectly well aware that I was near the finish? I looked on and said nothing, because I knew that my death would set things straight and because I wanted to see whether there was any gratitude in that fellow or not. I can't say that I am surprised at finding that there is none.'

'Why have you always repelled him?' asked Matthew sorrowfully. 'You yourself say that we must reap as we sow.'

Mr Litton made no reply for some time.

'I was very fond of him when he was a boy,' he said musingly at length. 'He was a nice boy—active and manly, and clever too. But he has chosen to throw away all his gifts. I daresay I have been harsh with him; I didn't think it wise to spoil him. But it is not to me alone that he has shown himself selfish and ungrateful. Of course it is possible—just possible—that he may turn over a new leaf. Anyhow, he had better be sent for, I suppose.'

Matthew placed the interpretation which he had been meant to place upon this remark and wrote to Leonard the same evening.

'I do not myself believe that your uncle's life is in any immediate danger,' was the form in which he worded his sum-

mons, 'but he is in low spirits about himself and he wants you, though he is too proud to tell you so. I hope you won't be too proud to offer yourself to him.'

Three days later Leonard appeared in person to assure Matthew laughingly that pride of that description was far too expensive a luxury for him to indulge in.

'I've seen Jennings,' he added, 'and I should imagine, from what he says, that the closing scene was imminent. As for Uncle Richard, he received me about as cordially as a badger receives a terrier. He asked whether I had come to make arrangements for the funeral, and hoped I should approve of his last will and testament when I saw it. I said I hoped so too; whereupon he requested me to get out of his sight. Nice, conciliatory sort of old person, that uncle of mine. He didn't allow me to leave the room before he had told me some agreeable home truths.'

'You must bear with him,' said Matthew; 'he is old and ill, and you have tried him in more ways than one. Besides, his bark is worse than his bite.'

'I sincerely trust so; still I must confess that I don't enjoy being barked at. I get about as much of that as I can stand on the domestic hearth. Sometimes I wonder whether any man was ever so barked at before upon such slight provocation. Lilian's last grievance is that I have turned you out of house and home. Now, I ask you, as a truthful man, is that the case? Was there the very smallest necessity for your letting your house and going into these beastly lodgings? Hasn't everything turned out exactly as I told you it would,

and isn't it certain that your advance will be repaid before the summer is over ?'

The aggrieved tone in which these questions were put was matched by Matthew's reply, which likewise took an interrogative form.

'What made you tell her anything about it ?' the latter asked ; 'I thought the matter was to be one entirely between ourselves.'

'I didn't tell her ; she found out. Women are as sure to find out everything as they are to be found out themselves in the long run. Moreover, I must say that, if you wanted the secret kept, you set about keeping it in a funny sort of way. Whatever Uncle Richard may be, he is not a simpleton, and it was easy enough for him to guess, by putting two and two together, why a man with an increasing practice was compelled to cut down expenses all of a sudden. Not that you were really compelled to do any such thing ; that's the provoking part of it !'

Matthew hung his head. He felt that Leonard had some just cause for complaint against him, and he hardly knew how to justify himself.

'Well,' he said, after a minute, 'I am sorry if I let the cat out of the bag, but I still think that I was right to exercise a little forethought. To speak openly, I had to consider what my position would be in the event of my having to do without the interest of £10,000 for three or four years.'

'As if I had ever dreamt of inflicting such a penance upon you !'

‘I know you never dreamt of it, my dear fellow ; still I had to take possibilities into account. I thought at the time—and I haven’t changed my opinion yet—that your uncle was and is free from any organic disease. If there is any absolute reason why he should not live for another ten years, I do not know of it.’

‘You don’t mean that!’ exclaimed Leonard, in consternation ; ‘you are not speaking seriously.’

‘I am speaking quite seriously ; but of course, as I am not Mr Litton’s doctor, I have nothing to form an opinion upon, except the evidence of my eyes.’

‘Ah, well, that’s true,’ observed Leonard, drawing a breath of relief. ‘And Jennings says he may drop off his perch at any moment.’

‘Exactly so ; and that is why I wanted you to come down,’ answered Matthew, whose nerves were set on edge by such speeches ; ‘but I suppose it isn’t necessary to keep on reminding him that his health is in a precarious state.’

‘Not in the least ; and I haven’t reminded him of it. It was he who first introduced the subject. All the same, I hope he won’t keep me here long. As you may imagine, I am eager to return to my happy home and my devoted wife.’

He continued for some little time to make his hearer wince by discoursing about Lilian in this sarcastic strain. Sarcasm was not his strong point and he overdid the thing painfully ; but it was at least abundantly clear that he was both angry and unhappy. Matthew said very little, finding it impossible to judge from a one-sided report whether Leonard or Lilian was respon-

sible for the deplorable condition of affairs hinted at ; only he noticed, with sorrow, that his friend had deteriorated mentally and physically. The healthy, careless young fellow had become an anxious, irritable and somewhat sallow-faced man ; he had put on flesh and his eyes were no longer clear.

‘Worry, late hours and too much eating and drinking, I suppose,’ was the physician’s unspoken verdict. ‘What helpless machines we all are, and what small cause any one of us has to crow over another ! Well, I daresay he will get rid of his worries soon ; for the old man doesn’t seem to cling to life.’

Aloud he said :

‘I must be off on my rounds now ; I will look you and your uncle up in a day or two. Meanwhile, try to be kind and pleasant with him—if for no other reason, because it is quite upon the cards that he may execute a fresh will yet.’

CHAPTER VIII

PROVIDENCE OR NEMESIS

MATTHEW'S landlady gave it as her opinion that if Mr Austin was curing other people, he was assuredly killing himself. 'Up till all hours, eatin' of his dinner *where* he can and *when* he can, tearin' about in that dog-cart of his, whether 'tis rain or shine—flesh and blood can't 'old out against such ways,' she told one of her cronies. 'I can't complain of his givin' trouble; but as for makin' of him comfortable, I put it to you whether I can undertake it, with on'y myself and the girl to look after him and the ground-floor fam'ly. Glad shall I be when he gets back into his own 'ouse! What ever he wanted to let it to them Jews for—coinin' money as he must be—is more than I can account for, and a nice job 'twould be if I was to 'ave him fall ill on my 'ands!'

Matthew, though a little fagged at times, was in no danger of falling ill; but he certainly had a very long list of patients, and so some days elapsed before he found time to inquire after his old friend at Wilverton Grange. When he did so, he was able to obtain information from the best authority; for, as chance would have it, he encountered Dr Jennings at the foot of the staircase. Amicable relations had always subsisted between the two rival practitioners, although the elder did not quite approve,

and perhaps could hardly be expected to approve, of his colleague's friendly visits to Mr Litton. In his heart of hearts he suspected Matthew of sometimes giving advice gratis ; but not even to his wife had he confessed that he entertained such unworthy suspicions. Upon the present occasion he was very polite, suave and oracular, giving it to be understood that his patient was, if anything, a shade better, but abstaining from the mention of details.

'I have told Mr Jerome that, while this cold wind lasts, his uncle should not leave his bedroom,' he said. 'Great care and complete rest : if these instructions are adhered to, we may—er—hope for the best, I believe. I do not think that Mr Litton ought to see many people just now.'

'Oh, then I won't go upstairs,' answered Matthew.

Dr Jennings spread out his plump hands, closed his eyes and smiled deprecatingly.

'My dear sir, pray do not take me as laying any prohibition upon you. I do not know what subjects you are in the habit of discussing with our friend. Sometimes I have noticed that he was a little agitated after his interviews with you ; but that may have been pure coincidence. I feel convinced that I may rely upon your discretion as I would upon my own. *Good morning.*'

Many and many a time afterwards did Matthew regret that he had not taken the hint thus delicately conveyed and left the house with his bland fellow-physician ; but he knew perfectly well that a visit from him could not do Mr Litton any harm, and he was anxious to hear how the uncle and nephew were

getting on together. Presently, therefore, he was ushered into the long and lofty bedroom where Leonard was sitting with the old gentleman, and a hasty glance from one to the other convinced him that they were not getting on together at all.

‘Don’t let me detain you,’ Mr Litton said, holding out a welcoming hand to Matthew, while with the other he waved his nephew impatiently away. ‘There is nothing for you to do either indoors or out of doors, I am afraid; but I presume that you would rather be anywhere about the premises than here.’

Leonard looked at the new-comer with a slight elevation of his eyebrows and shoulders, as who should say, ‘You see what I have to put up with;’ but he answered good-humouredly enough:

‘I’ll leave Austin to entertain you, then. If you want me later on, I shall not be far away.’

‘You are very kind,’ returned the old man, speaking in dry, harsh accents, ‘but I do not know why you should think that I am likely to want you. Haven’t you just heard from Jennings that the alarming symptoms have disappeared?’ When the door had closed behind Leonard, he asked: ‘Ought I to beg pardon all round, do you think? Jennings has been comforting me with sanguine assurances, and my disconsolate nephew has been laughing on the wrong side of his mouth. Perhaps the least I can do is to offer to pay his railway fare from London and back.’

‘Well, I am very glad to hear that you are better and that Dr Jennings thinks so,’ said Matthew, judging it best to ignore

observations to which he could not reply at once honestly and agreeably.

‘What!—although you know that there will be a legacy for you when my will is read? My dear Austin, you surprise me!’

‘Come Mr Litton; I haven’t done anything to deserve that sneer.’

‘Well, well! I beg your pardon, then. If I am not to apologise to you for my indecent tenacity of life, let me apologise for my bad manners. Perhaps you will admit that, under all the circumstances, a little irritation is pardonable. I don’t complain of that fellow for wishing to enter upon his inheritance; but he might have the good grace to look rather less woebegone when he is told that I may survive a few weeks longer.’

‘You see what you are determined to see in his face. If he looked delighted, you would say that he was trying to humbug you.’

‘H’m!—should I? It is certain that he wouldn’t look delighted unless he was trying to humbug me. Possibly he is not so very much more contemptible than the average human being, and possibly I may give him rather greater cause to bless my memory than he would have if I were to die to-night. There will be time yet to send for the lawyer once more, it seems. You have no idea, Austin, what a strange sensation it is to be so near death and yet to feel as well as I do at the present moment. I have no pain; there is nothing the matter with me that I am conscious of, except a certain languor. And, quite between ourselves, I don’t want to die; though there is no reason that I can think of why I should want to live.’

'A man must be very unhappy or in very great pain before he wishes to die,' said Matthew.

'I suppose so. How can people sing the hymns that they do in church about longing for the New Jerusalem and so forth without laughing! Imagine some breathless messenger darting in among the devout congregation with the news that an earthquake was imminent. What a stampede there would be, headed by the parson! For my own part, I have never had any curiosity to behold the City of the Blest, nor any expectation of taking up my residence there. Looking back upon the past, I consider that I have done my duty fairly well. I have committed no great sins, having had no great temptations. My sins of omission have been more numerous, no doubt; still it would be absurd to say that I have earned an eternity of suffering. Dives, you know, was sent to Hell upon the express ground that he had had his share of good things on earth and that it was somebody else's turn now. At any rate, three score years and ten would square matters between him and Lazarus—supposing, of course, that Lazarus found it enjoyable to repose in Abraham's bosom and do nothing for so long a period. I am shocking you, I see.'

'You do shock me a little,' confessed Matthew frankly; 'it is so easy to turn matters of faith into ridicule by pretending to interpret imagery literally. I don't think you really mean what you imply, either.'

'What do I imply? That I can't accept the doctrine of Communism, and that I can't for the life of me see what other doctrine is involved in that parable? You, I suspect, are a

bit of a Communist at heart; but I am quite sure that His Holiness the Pope, with his Peter's pence, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, with his £15,000 a year, are nothing of the sort. Priests and sceptics, theologians and philosophers, we none of us have the most distant idea of what our future state will be, and I presume that is why we are so desperately unwilling to enter upon it.'

Matthew stated his own simple creed, to which it may be hoped that neither the Pope nor the Archbishop of Canterbury would have taken much exception. If he did not convince his hearer, whose long life had been spent chiefly in reading and who had the origin and development of most dogmas at his fingers' ends, he at least increased the esteem and affection with which the latter already regarded him.

'You are a good man my dear Austin,' Mr Litton wound up the dialogue by saying. 'I wish with all my heart you were related to me, so that I might have some plausible excuse for leaving the Grange to you.'

'I assure you I shouldn't like it,' answered Matthew; 'I have neither the training nor the tastes of a country gentleman. Leonard, you may depend upon it, will make a far better master here than I ever should.'

'Who told you that he was going to be master here? He may or he may not succeed me; I have not made up my mind yet. In any case he will inherit quite as much as he deserves. You may console him by telling him that from me, if you like.'

Matthew did not repeat these exact words, but when, after

taking his leave, he came upon Leonard sauntering listlessly about the garden, with his hands in his pockets, he felt entitled to state that Mr Litton had no intention of disinheriting his nephew.

‘Oh, I never supposed that he would cut me off with a shilling,’ Leonard answered somewhat ungraciously; ‘the question is whether he means to leave me money enough to keep up a place like this. If he doesn’t, I shall sell the place, that’s all.’

‘You had better not say so to him.’

‘It doesn’t seem to matter much what I say to him; he would pick a quarrel with an angel from Heaven! Shall I go back to him now, or do you think he might be left to vent his nasty temper upon his valet for the next few hours?’

‘A dying man must be allowed some privileges,’ Matthew began.

‘But, confound it all! he isn’t dying. At least, he declares he isn’t.’

‘Let him have his privileges, all the same. If I were you I should go and sit with him. Whatever he may pretend, he does really like having somebody to talk to, and I think he will be pleased if you go to him of your own accord.’

‘I don’t believe he wants me,’ said Leonard rather sullenly; ‘you heard the amiable speech with which he turned me out of the room just now. He takes it for granted that I am only here for the purpose of dutifully closing his eyes—and the worst of it is that he is not in the least mistaken. Anyhow, I think I’ll go for a stroll before I face him again.’

As matters turned out, it was very unfortunate for Leonard that he did not adhere to that resolution. He was cross and dispirited ; he knew he was not in the frame of mind to listen patiently to his uncle's caustic remarks, and a little fresh air and exercise would doubtless have done him good. But in the history of individuals, as in the history of the world, trifles play an important part, and it was a trifle that made him decide, after Matthew had left him, to return to the house, instead of stretching his legs with a long walk. He was nearing the stable-yard when a groom rode out, and stopping for a moment to look at the horse, he asked carelessly :

‘Where are you off to, John?’

‘Telegram for London, sir,’ answered the man, exhibiting the slip of paper, upon which Leonard's eye caught the name of his uncle's lawyer.

He walked on, while the groom trotted down the drive ; but at the end of a hundred yards or so he paused and turned on his heel.

‘What fresh atrocity is that old brute meditating now?’ he wondered. ‘I expect he has told Austin something, and if it's anything unpleasant, he won't be able to deny himself the pleasure of telling me. Perhaps, after all, I had better go in and find out what this means.’

What it meant was that Mr Litton had almost made up his mind to execute a will considerably more favourable to Leonard's interests than that which already existed ; but nobody would have guessed as much from the reception that he accorded to his nephew.

‘This is an unexpected honour,’ he sneered. ‘Have you anything particular to say—or to ask for?’

‘I thought you might be rather dull all by yourself,’ answered Leonard shortly.

‘What kindly solicitude! No, I don’t feel much duller than I have felt for the last twenty or thirty years, thank you, and I don’t feel much worse in health. I am sure you will be glad to hear that.’

‘Good heavens! hasn’t this sort of thing been said often enough?’ exclaimed Leonard, at the end of his patience. ‘Let it be agreed and acknowledged that I am waiting anxiously for you to draw your last breath, and let us try and talk about something else!’

‘By all means,’ replied the old man, smiling grimly. ‘What would you like to talk about? I am no authority upon sport, I haven’t kept myself informed as to matters of social gossip, and politics, I am afraid, don’t interest you. Perhaps it would interest you to hear that I have just telegraphed for my lawyer and that, when he comes, I shall instruct him to draw up a new will for me.’

‘Of course it would interest me to hear what the provisions of your new will are to be; but I don’t suppose you mean to tell me.’

‘Oh, I might, if I were pressed. Half the pleasure of cutting out a thoroughly undeserving expectant is lost when one reflects that one will not be present to see his long face at the reading of the will.’

‘I don’t know what you call undeserving,’ said Leonard, turning rather white.

‘You don’t, eh? Well, I call a man who deliberately wastes his whole life undeserving; I call a man who steals his best friend’s sweetheart undeserving; I call a man who, not content with that achievement, proceeds to sponge upon his best friend for money undeserving. I may be wrong; but that would, to my mind, be a tolerably final definition of an undeserving person.’

‘It would be a mere waste of time to protest against your flattering estimate of me,’ said Leonard. ‘May I venture to inquire what form of punishment you propose to inflict upon the monster that you describe?’

‘Oh, I don’t pretend to have the power of inflicting adequate punishments: Nemesis or Providence usually undertakes jobs of that kind. But I should say that such a man as I have spoken of might think himself lucky, if, on the death of an uncle whose wishes he had never troubled himself to consult, he came into a legacy of £1000. Or shall we put it at £2000, to clear ourselves from all suspicion of rancour?’

This was worse than the worst that Leonard had ever contemplated. He did not perceive that the old man was simply amusing himself with a somewhat grisly jest; he really believed that he was being threatened with the loss of what he had counted upon as a certainty, and the blood rose to his head.

‘By God!’ he exclaimed, ‘you shall never make such a will as that!’

‘How are you going to prevent me from doing what I please with my own?’ asked Mr Litton, bending forward and rubbing his hands together. ‘Thank you for displaying yourself to me

in your true colours, though. I feel amply compensated now for my inability to return here with the mourners after my funeral.'

It may have been the old fellow's chuckling, malicious laugh that maddened Leonard ; it must, in any case, have been some sudden access of madness that prompted him to grip his tormentor by both elbows and shake him violently. The moment that he had committed this unmanly assault a reaction set in, and he fell back, trembling and overwhelmed with shame.

Mr Litton was trembling too. His face became of a ghastly grey hue, his lips turned blue ; twice he struggled to speak, and then sank in a heap upon his chair, his jaw dropping and a glassy film overspreading his eyes.

Leonard Jerome was neither a coward nor a fool. More than once in the course of his life he had found himself in situations sufficiently trying to the nerves, and his presence of mind had never failed him. But now he stood for several minutes, as if paralysed, staring stupidly at the huddled-up figure in the arm-chair, while a cold sweat broke out upon his forehead. He knew quite well what had happened ; he knew that his uncle was dead ; he knew—or at any rate, he believed—that his own position was a perilous one and that it behoved him to take some measures in order to secure his personal safety. Yet he remained motionless and helpless. He kept on repeating to himself, 'He is dead, and I have killed him. He is dead, and I have killed him.' But beyond that point his brain refused to work. He had just sense enough left to abstain from ringing the bell—just sense enough to be aware that, if one of the

servants were to enter the room at that moment, his guilt would be legible upon his scared countenance.

Then on a sudden it flashed across him that nobody knew of his having returned to his uncle's bedroom. Why should anybody ever know? The question had hardly formed itself in his mind before he turned and fled. Presently he was in the great, dim, empty library: he had dropped into one of the leather-covered arm-chairs and was trying to think. Surely he was not a murderer! Of course he was not: it would be preposterous to accuse himself, or allow himself to be accused, of that. But he certainly would not be accused, since there was no evidence of any sort or kind. And beyond all doubt the poor old man was dead; so that raising a disturbance and sending for the doctor would do no good in the world. He had died, too, without altering his will. Readers will be glad to hear that Leonard experienced a shock of self-reproach when this aspect of the case presented itself to him, although they will easily understand that self-reproach is not always incompatible with self-congratulation. By degrees his pulse resumed its normal regularity and his head grew clear. There was really no need for agitation or forethought; all he had to do was to slip quietly out of the house, return from his walk in half-an-hour or so and display some natural consternation on being informed of the calamity which had occurred during his absence.

'What a mercy it is,' said he to himself, as he stepped out through one of the dining-room windows and made for the shelter of the adjacent shrubbery, 'that I told Austin I was going for a stroll! All the same, I wish to heaven I had kept my word!'

He was likely to wish that to the end of his days. That he would ever be charged with having brought about his uncle's death was in the last degree improbable; but that he would escape all punishment for what he had done was, it may safely be asserted, impossible. As Mr Litton had remarked, 'Nemesis or Providence usually undertakes jobs of that kind,' and jobs undertaken by 'Nemesis or Providence' are pretty sure to be successfully carried out.

CHAPTER IX

LEONARD GETS HIS DESERTS

WHILE Leonard wandered through the woods, which (as he reflected) were now his own, and in close proximity to which the greater part of his future life would probably be spent, he assured himself that his feeling of guilt and remorse was overstrained. He was very much ashamed of having laid violent hands upon a helpless old man and very sorry that, in a moment of passion, he had so far forgotten himself as to act in that way ; but as he had assuredly been innocent of any intention to kill his uncle, he was no more guilty of murder, or even manslaughter, than he would have been if their altercation had been confined to words. Every day somebody is driven over in the street, and the driver who has been so unfortunate as to knock the life out of him is as often as not exonerated from all blame. Still the driver, no doubt, feels uncomfortable for some little time after such a mishap, and Leonard would fain have believed that the extreme discomfort of which he himself was conscious was of a kindred nature. He wandered about in the woods for more than an hour, expecting every moment that some agitated messenger would come out in search of him ; but his solitude was not disturbed, nor did he see or hear a living creature, except the birds and a bright-eyed squirrel, who stared questioningly at him until he impatiently

picked up a fir-cone and drove the inquisitive little beast away. What could it possibly matter to a squirrel whether Richard Litton or Leonard Jerome ruled over that small portion of the world in which its lot had been cast?

The human dependents of the late Richard Litton proved less suspicious and less impertinent. Everything fell out exactly in accordance with Leonard's anticipations. On his return to the house he was met by his uncle's valet, who seemed to be genuinely distressed (is not the loss of an easy and well-paid berth enough to cause genuine distress to anybody?), and who told him just what he had expected to hear.

'Understanding that you were out, sir, I sent at once for Dr Jennings,' the man said; 'but there wasn't no sign of life when I found the master in his chair. He must have been took very sudden with one of those attacks he has had lately, and I suppose Mr Austin was the last person to see him alive. I hope you don't think I was to blame, sir. The master never liked me to go up to his room without I was rung for, nor yet I shouldn't have gone up when I did, only I began to feel uneasy about him.'

No blame was imputed to anyone either by Leonard or by Dr Jennings, who arrived later in the day and unhesitatingly pronounced death to have been due to failure of the heart's action.

'The very thing, Mr Jerome, which, as you may remember, I warned you that we must be prepared for. Did I not mention that to you? Well, perhaps it was to Mr Austin, whom I met on his way to see your poor uncle. I had hoped that, with care

and precaution, his life might have been prolonged for months, or even years ; but I cannot say that I am at all taken by surprise. The truth is that my poor old friend—if I may be permitted to call him so—has been upon the brink of eternity all the winter through. It is some comfort to me, personally, to know that I was successful in bringing him through his late illness and that he has succumbed to organic disease, against which medical skill is powerless.'

To hear that Dr Jennings had not been taken by surprise was, at any rate, some comfort to the bereaved nephew, and it was a greater comfort still that he was not even asked whether he had seen his uncle after Matthew Austin had left the house. Lies, no doubt, would have to be told subsequently ; but Leonard was not a practised liar, and he wished to be spared the ordeal of telling them as far as might be. During the remainder of the day and until late at night he had so many indispensable duties to attend to that the voice of conscience could not get a hearing from him. Relatives, near and distant, had to be communicated with, orders had to be given, the date of the funeral and the necessary preparations for it had to be considered. To his wife Leonard despatched a brief and cold announcement of the fact that Mr Litton was dead, adding that if she wished to come down to the Grange she could of course do so, but that he did not himself see any need for her leaving London at present. In reality he dreaded Lilian's questions and the searching gaze of her disdainful eyes. Of late she had always conveyed to him the disagreeable impression that she had found him out, although there had been nothing so very

heinous to discover. There was something now, and he did not care about being confronted with her.

Much more eager was he to be confronted with Mr Mildmay, his uncle's lawyer, whose advent on the following morning threw him into a flutter of more or less pleasurable excitement. But the tall, grave, bald-headed man was as reticent as he was impassive, and never a hint could be obtained from him as to the purport of the last will and testament which he had prepared, under his late client's instructions, some ten days previously. He had no reason to suppose, he said, that that document had been revoked or destroyed; he believed he knew where it was to be found, and he would, with Mr Jerome's permission, take charge of it until the proper time should come for it to be read. He was quite unable to say whether Mr Litton had telegraphed for him with a view to making other testamentary dispositions or not; it might be so, but he really had no means of knowing. Somehow or other, Mr Mildmay's manner was not altogether reassuring. The lawyer was polite and deferential; but surely he would have been a little more congratulatory if he had been in the presence of a wealthy man, whose patronage was worth securing.

'Well,' thought Leonard to himself, 'if the worst comes to the worst, I can but sell the place, and it is pretty certain that I have said good-bye to poverty.'

Then he thought of his uncle's ironical suggestion that he might consider himself lucky if he came into a legacy of a couple of thousand pounds, and he remembered with compunction the paroxysm of anger into which he had been thrown by

that absurd menace. Yet he could not banish the idea from his mind that, if he had exercised a little more self-control than he had done, he might have, and probably would have, fared a good deal worse than he was now likely to do. 'Good Lord !' he muttered, 'if I don't look out, I shall be rejoicing at having killed the poor old fellow presently. How desperately near we all are to being downright scoundrels !'

Most of us, it is to be feared, are not quite as exempt from risk of coming under that category as we should like to be ; still a fair proportion of us (knowing that we have as yet done nothing absolutely scoundrelly) are able to take a complacently detached view of human depravity. As for Leonard, his self-esteem, which had fallen to a somewhat low ebb, was encouraged towards recovery by the visit from Matthew Austin for which he had been prepared, and to which he had looked forward with certain misgivings.

'Oh, you needn't tell me that,' Matthew interrupted his first halting expressions of regret by saying ; 'as soon as I saw your face I guessed how you felt about it. But of course you could have had no idea that the end was so near, and now that my poor old friend is gone, I may confess to you that, in my opinion, he provoked you unnecessarily.'

'I really think he did,' said Leonard eagerly. 'I always tried my best to keep upon good terms with him, but he was simply irreconcilable. After all, they say that no man likes his heir.'

'He has made you his heir, then ?'

'I suppose so ; but I don't know anything about it yet.'

That fellow Mildmay has collared the will, which is to be read after the funeral, I believe. That is the usual course, isn't it ?'

'I can't tell you,' answered Matthew. 'I should have thought that the nearest relative of the deceased would have a right to examine all documents ; but I have no experience in such matters.' He added meditatively, after a pause, 'I wish you had seen him once more before he died, though.'

'Would it have made any difference if I had ?'

'In a pecuniary sense ? Well, it might ; he spoke to me as if he contemplated making some further alteration in his will. But, my dear fellow, I know you too well to believe that you are as heartless as you choose to make yourself out. You would like to have shaken hands and made friends with the old man before he died ; and it is because you didn't that you have been lying awake half the night and have given yourself those dark circles under the eyes. Don't worry yourself any more ; depend upon it, your uncle has forgiven you, and I think we may also depend upon it that if he is in a state of consciousness now, he is conscious of having sometimes been a little unjust to you.'

This unexpected tribute to his personal character put Leonard in considerably better conceit with himself, while it relieved him from the necessity of uttering those false statements which had seemed to be inevitable. Dead men tell no tales, and the only living man who might have interrogated him as to what he had been about on the afternoon of his uncle's death took it for granted that he had nothing to reveal.

Lord and Lady Bannock, together with a number of more

or less interested, but not very sanguine, connections of the late Mr Litton, arrived in time to attend the funeral obsequies, which were performed with much gloomy splendour. A long string of carriages followed the *cortège* and most of the county notabilities attended in person ; for although Mr Litton had never been intimate with his neighbours, and although, among the many mourners who stood around his grave, Matthew Austin was probably the only one who regretted him in the least, he had been very rich and he had led an irreproachable life. To have been the one and done the other is assuredly to have established a claim upon the customary forms of public recognition.

‘Well, well,’ Mr Frere remarked to Matthew, after the conclusion of the ceremony, ‘I dare say poor Litton would have been alive now if he had had the sense to send Jennings about his business and call you in ; but it’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good. There will be gayer times at the Grange now that young Jerome has come into the property, eh ? Can I give you a lift home ?’

Matthew declined this offer, having received an intimation from the solemn Mr Mildmay that his presence at the reading of the will would be desirable ; so he returned to the house with those members of the family who had come from a distance, some of whom, he fancied, looked slightly askance at him. He felt a little apologetic towards these sullen-looking collaterals, knowing that he was to receive a legacy and doubting very much whether they would get anything at all amongst them ; but he was a good deal less anxious to hear what his

own share of the spoil was to be than to ascertain what provision had been made for Leonard. Disappointment, he was afraid, awaited his friend, and he felt pretty sure that Leonard had reached one of those critical stages in life at which disappointments are apt to have serious consequences. The young man's marriage had turned out badly; the chances were that he was deeply in debt; he had no profession or occupation; if he should now succeed to a property which he was without the means of keeping up, he might very likely turn sour or go to the dogs altogether. On the other hand, prosperity might be the salvation of him—might even bring about a return of that conjugal felicity which, after all, is more frequently insured by good spirits and good temper than by anything else. Which of us knows the real truth about his neighbour? Matthew's nature was so sympathetic that he understood his own sex better than the generality of men can pretend to do; but it cannot be said that he was a very excellent judge of the other. The fact is that he had no high opinion of the woman whom he had once loved and that he held Lilian chiefly answerable for the moral decay of which he could not help detecting symptoms in Leonard.

It was from cogitations of a somewhat melancholy kind that Matthew was aroused by the sound of his own name, pronounced loudly and emphatically. He was sitting in the great library where he had so often spent a pleasant hour with the crippled old man who would never open a book again, and he had been listening inattentively to a long list of small bequests, read out in a dry, monotonous voice. That

he himself would be mentioned presently he was aware ; but it startled him not a little to hear that the amount bequeathed to him was no less a sum than twenty thousand pounds. Matthew stared in amazement at his fellow-listeners, whose amazement appeared to be fully equal to his own. Twenty thousand pounds to a mere acquaintance ! But this was not all. To the said Matthew Austin the testator likewise bequeathed the whole of his valuable library, 'knowing that by him my books will be appreciated and cared for, while a trifling expenditure will enable my residuary legatee to fill up the vacant shelves with a sufficiency of handsomely-bound volumes.'

Matthew hung his head, feeling very like a robber, wishing with all his heart that he had been less munificently treated and unable as yet to realise what a difference the acquisition of this small fortune would make in his future life. The lawyer went on reading. Leonard Jerome was to have thirty thousand pounds down, together with a certain portion of the family plate ; to Lady Bannock were left the pictures, household furniture, carriages, the rest of the plate and so forth. Finally, after a scarcely perceptible pause, came the unexpected announcement that to Lady Bannock also went the residue of her uncle's estate, real and personal, for life, with remainder to her eldest son, or, in default, to Leonard Jerome's eldest son, or, in default, to any such person (with the exception of Leonard Jerome) as Lady Bannock might by her last will and testament nominate.

The awestruck silence with which this statement was re-

ceived was broken at length by the voice of Mr Litton's heiress, who exclaimed :

'I never heard of anything so monstrous! Of course I shall not think of cutting my brother out. I don't mind accepting something reasonable ; but I shall at once take steps to have this property and a fair share of income handed over to him.'

Mr Mildmay rose, crossed the room and began to explain to the indignant lady in a low voice how impossible it would be for her to act in the manner indicated. Then there was a general breaking-up of groups and unloosening of tongues. The sable-clad relatives (not one of whom had, after all, been forgotten, and who were consequently in a mood to view with leniency the eccentricities of their departed kinsman) made for the door, and presently Matthew was able to approach Leonard, who, with his hands in his pockets, was standing beside one of the windows, whistling softly.

'Well,' remarked the latter, 'this is what you might call a pretty good sell, isn't it?'

'I am very sorry,' said Matthew.

'You oughtn't to be ; you haven't done so badly. Not that I grudge you your luck, old man ; I only wish he had left you double the money—which indeed he might have done without impoverishing the residuary legatee. As for me, I must try to look pleasant. After all, when I have paid you what I owe you and settled a few other claims, I shall still have some extra hundreds a year, I suppose. One can be quite happy upon a small income when one is as fortunate in other respects as I am, you know.'

‘There is just this to be said,’ observed Matthew, thinking it best to disregard the allusion, ‘that your sister has no children and is not likely to have any now ; whereas you—’

‘Oh, I’m not likely to have any ; and if a son were born to me to-morrow, the chances are that I shouldn’t be alive to borrow a five-pound note of him when he came into his inheritance. No ; I’m effectually bowled out—and, upon my word and honour, I can’t quite understand why ! Perhaps I ought to be congratulating myself upon having got as much as I have.’

‘I am convinced,’ said Matthew sadly, ‘that he did not mean that will to stand. It is a thousand pities that his life was not prolonged for another twenty-four hours.’

Leonard made no rejoinder ; he was thinking to himself that Providence or Nemesis had indeed undertaken his case to some purpose.

Matthew, for his part, soon saw that the best thing he could do was to leave the brother and sister to discuss the new state of affairs together. He took his departure somewhat shamefacedly, and went back to his lodgings with a confused sense of having profited more largely by the liberality of his deceased friend than he ought to have done. Yet, as a matter of fact, Lady Bannock was far too rich to miss £20,000 and too little of a literary connoisseur to regret her uncle’s library, while a country doctor who loved his house and his garden might well permit himself to rejoice a little at the thought that he would ere long be again in possession of both.

CHAPTER X

‘ARBITRIUM POPULARIS AURAE’

‘TO my mind,’ said Mrs Jennings, shaking her head solemnly, ‘it is a very strange affair—very strange indeed. And I suppose we shall never get at the rights of it now. What we do know is that that man was the last person who saw Mr Litton alive and that he has profited enormously by poor Mr Litton’s death. It is difficult to believe that such a will can have been made without instigation, and altogether— However, it is best to say as little as possible, and I should not have said as much as this to anyone but you.’

‘What does Dr Jennings think about it?’ eagerly inquired the old lady who was drinking Mrs Jennings’s tea and who, it is needless to add, was only one of many who had been honoured with an equal share of that amiable woman’s confidence.

‘Oh, you know what Dr Jennings is! He is too cautious, besides being far too kind-hearted and considerate, to commit himself. But I am sure that even he feels now that there ought to have been an inquest.’

‘Well,’ said the other, ‘I must confess that there was always something I didn’t quite like about Mr Austin—a sort of absent manner which gave one the impression of an uneasy conscience. Still I never thought of his being a murderer.’

‘Oh, my dear, what a word to use! Do you suppose I

meant to imply that he had poisoned the old man or throttled him?’

‘But if he didn’t, what would have been the good of an inquest?’ asked Mrs Jennings’s friend pertinently.

‘I did not say,’ replied Mrs Jennings, with some displeasure, ‘that a coroner’s jury would have returned a verdict of murder against Mr Austin. But it is perfectly possible to cause death without resorting to violence, and I happen to know for a fact—that much my husband has admitted—that Dr Jennings, who met him as he was entering the house, particularly cautioned him against agitating the patient. Of course he may be quite innocent; only I cannot truthfully say that his conduct strikes me as that of an innocent man. To accept a legacy of £20,000 under the circumstances, and never even attempt to explain how such a sum came to be left to him!—well, I really don’t think he can be surprised if the general feeling is that he owes some explanation to honest folks.’

The general feeling, unfortunately, was very much what Mrs Jennings asserted it to be. She herself, no doubt, had done what in her lay to create and foster that feeling; but perhaps it would have arisen without her aid, for very few people are sincerely rejoiced to hear that their next-door neighbour has come into a fortune. The circumstances, too, were a little suspicious. Was it not a matter of notoriety that Mr Austin had had pecuniary losses early in the winter? Was it not well known that he had been a constant visitor at the Grange, although he had never visited Mr Litton in his medical capacity? Had not everybody noticed that for some time after the funeral

he had gone about with a hang-dog look, and had replied brusquely and awkwardly to the congratulations of his acquaintances? And that simulated friendship of his for Leonard Jerome, against whom he might naturally be supposed to cherish a grudge? Oh, there was more in it than met the eye; and although there may not have been many persons in Wilverton who suspected Matthew Austin of murder, not a few were surprised and disappointed to learn that there was no prospect of the will being contested on the ground of undue influence.

The chief beneficiary under the will would have been only too glad to see its validity contested; but she was advised that such a course (even if it could be adopted with any chance of success) would prove in no way advantageous to her brother; so she had to content herself with devising other means for improving her brother's pecuniary position—which, as she was now sole mistress of considerable wealth, was no such difficult matter, after all. Lady Bannock remained at the Grange, where there were a good many things to be attended to, while Leonard returned to London, and, consequently, did not hear the unpleasant rumours which were being circulated about his friend.

Some weeks passed before these rumours came to Matthew's ears, and it was in a somewhat modified form that they reached him at length. He did not understand, that is to say, that he was accused of having killed his benefactor, but only that he was supposed to have utilised his unquestionable influence over Mr Litton for his own ends. That, he could not help acknowledg-

ing, was a very natural comment to make upon the case. He had half expected it and did not greatly resent it, being, as usual, a good deal more disquieted about other people's affairs than about his own. Leonard had gone off to London without wishing him good-bye and had not written since; Lady Bannock, whom he had seen once or twice, had spoken with much bitterness of Lilian, who, she declared, was doing far more towards disgusting her brother with life and driving him to despair than could ever have been accomplished by the gross injustice of Uncle Richard—‘though that has been enough to sicken anybody.’ Upon the whole, it seemed but too probable that a promising career was in danger of ending badly.

Lady Bannock was not unaware that disagreeable things were being whispered about her friend the doctor; but she had not introduced the topic in talking to him, partly because it was an awkward sort of topic to introduce, and partly because she herself was inclined to think that, since Matthew had possessed such power with the old recluse, he might have employed it more unselfishly. However, she mentioned current reports to Leonard, when he ran down to make arrangements for the removal of the plate which he had inherited, and the outburst of wrath with which her information was received imbued her more than ever with the admiring conviction that she had been blessed by Heaven with the noblest and most chivalrous of brothers.

Leonard was for starting off there and then and ‘forcing that woman Jennings’s lies down her throat;’ but, as Lady Bannock pointed out to him, it is not possible to deal with a liar of the

female sex in that way, and, after a good deal of vapouring, he was fain to rest satisfied with the adoption of methods slightly less heroic. What he finally decided upon doing was to betake himself to the club, wait until the smoking-room was tolerably well filled with members, and then state, in a loud and defiant voice, how sorry he had been to hear that his friend Austin had been subjected to calumnies in certain quarters. There was not, he said, the shadow of an excuse for such calumnies, and he only wished he could trace them to their source.

Nobody responding to this indirect challenge, he went on to declare that what had struck him as being especially infamous was the insinuation that Austin's last interview with his uncle had had the effect of hastening the latter's death ; whereupon an old gentleman observed mildly :

‘But surely, Mr Jerome, one may assume that to have been so without making any infamous insinuations. I understand that Mr Litton suffered from heart disease and that Dr Jennings had warned him of the risk of agitation. How can we tell that no agitating discussion took place in the course of that interview? It seems reasonable enough to conclude that something of the sort did take place.’

‘There was no agitating discussion at all,’ answered Leonard shortly.

‘Oh, if you tell us so, we are bound to accept your word. But, so far as I am aware, Mr Austin has not deigned to give the slightest information upon the subject to anybody.’

‘Why the deuce should he? Who has the pretension to put him upon his trial, I should like to know?’

‘My dear Mr Jerome,’ said the old gentleman, ‘you are quite right to stand up for your friend and everyone will honour you for doing so ; but I’m afraid people will not be deterred from forming and expressing their own opinions by being simply told that you exonerate him. For my own part, I must confess that, if I were in his rather equivocal position, I should have taken some measures to clear my character before now.’

Leonard blustered a little ; but as he had not the courage to avow that he himself had seen and spoken with his uncle after the interview alluded to, his bluster produced no great effect upon his audience, and he went away feeling that he had done more harm than good.

Not without shame and contrition did he proceed to look up Matthew Austin, who was now once more installed in his own abode and who smiled at the vehemence with which his visitor denounced the busybodies of Wilverton.

‘I know that some uncharitable remarks have been made about me,’ Matthew said ; ‘but so long as they are not made to my face I don’t see why I should take any notice of them. Besides they were really inevitable. One can’t inherit a fortune from a comparative stranger without being accused of fortune-hunting.’

‘Oh, I don’t so much mind their calling you a fortune-hunter,’ answered Leonard.

And then, urged on by an irresistible craving to face the worst and have done with it, he proceeded to mention the specific charge which had so roused his ire.

The worst—in the sense which he mentally applied to that expression—did not come ; for his friend never thought of putting the question which he had dreaded.

‘It is not pleasant,’ said Matthew rather gravely, ‘to be accused of having, either intentionally or unintentionally, brought about the death of a fellow-creature ; but it can’t be helped. Moreover, there is just the possibility that what these people say may be true. Your uncle did not seem to me to be disturbed in mind when I left him, but, as you know, we had been talking of disturbing matters and he may have been more upset than I thought. Anyhow, I couldn’t affirm upon oath that our conversation had nothing to do with the attack which proved fatal to him : such as the imputation is, I must submit to it.’

For a moment Leonard was very nearly telling the whole truth. If it is not pleasant to be accused of having brought about the death of a fellow-creature, it is more unpleasant still to be conscious of having actually done so ; but it is, or ought to be, most unpleasant of all to stand by and let another bear the blame of one’s own misdeeds. He had opened his lips to speak (fearing, perhaps, lest delay should expose him to an overwhelming and ignoble temptation), when Matthew resumed lightly :

‘Anyhow, my shoulders are broad enough to bear the burden. The people whose opinion I value won’t think ill of me, and as for the others—well, since I don’t value their opinion, why should I care to alter it ? I don’t suppose they have it in their power to do me the slightest harm, even if they

wished to harm me ; but most likely they don't. They chatter for the sake of chattering and because the sterility of their minds leaves them a very limited range of subjects.'

It was in this guise that temptation presented itself to a harassed man and got the better of him. After all, was it in the least probable that Matthew would be injured by gossip which was sure to die down and be forgotten in the course of a few weeks? On the other hand, was it not painfully certain that if Leonard now had to confess what he had hitherto deliberately concealed, he must needs brand himself at least as a liar, if not as something worse? So he hesitated and was lost. Matthew began to ask questions about Lilian, to which he returned absent-minded replies ; he himself had to explain that it would be difficult for him immediately to repay those ten thousand pounds and to receive the anticipated assurance that there was no sort of hurry about the matter. He went away at length, having avowed nothing and knowing full well that he must henceforth for ever hold his peace. He had saved his reputation and parted with his self-esteem—a bad bargain, no doubt, but one which has been made thousands of times and will continue to be made with tolerable frequency until the human race becomes perfect or extinct.

Matthew, unfortunately, had under-estimated the mischief-making powers of Mrs Jennings and her satellites. These were in reality by no means trifling, and he was forced ere long to admit as much. He was likewise compelled to acknowledge that he was less indifferent to the good opinion of his neighbours than he had boasted of being. How essential to his comfort

had been the popularity which he had always hitherto enjoyed he only discovered when he lost it ; and that he had lost it he was not permitted to doubt. Wilverton did not precisely send him to Coventry, but unambiguous methods were adopted of signifying to him that he was under a cloud and that intimate association with him was no longer desired. At first he did not mind averted looks and cold replies to his greetings ; then he began to look out for these tacit slaps in the face ; then he grew sensitive and turned out of his way to avoid them ; finally, he reached the point of confessing to himself that if such a course of treatment were persevered with, his life would cease to be worth having. What hurt him more than anything else was that even Mrs Frere, who might have known him better than to condemn him unheard, passed him in the street, one day, with a bow and without a smile. He had some hope that the morbid acuteness of his perceptions had led him to suspect a slight where none had been intended until the same thing occurred again—after which, doubt was no longer possible.

Yet he was not left without one partisan amongst so many foes ; and of this stimulating fact he was made aware at the very moment when his spirits had fallen to so low an ebb that he had almost decided to leave the place. Pacing slowly to and fro in his garden on a sunny afternoon (for the dull season was again at hand and patients were few) he was not a little taken aback to see Anne Frere's tall figure advancing towards him across the grass. She was quite alone, and the faint flush upon her usually pale cheeks testified to her consciousness that she was doing a somewhat unconventional thing by thus calling upon a bachelor.

‘I caught sight of you from the road,’ she began, speaking quickly and a little breathlessly, as if she had not complete control over her voice; ‘I thought you would not mind my coming in for a minute. I—I rather wanted to speak to you.’

‘I am only too delighted,’ Matthew declared. And then, either because he was affected by the contagion of her embarrassment or because he had lost through disuse the trick of setting other people at their ease, he came to a rather awkward standstill. ‘It seems a long time since we last met,’ was the only observation that he could hit upon, by way of breaking the silence that followed.

‘Yes, it is some time,’ agreed Anne in an absent-minded tone. She added abruptly, after she had stood for a moment, glancing at the flowers and the shrubs, at anything and everything except her companion: ‘Spencer has left Mr Vawdrey.’

‘Indeed? I am sorry to hear that. Has he returned to his wife? Are you anxious about him?’

‘Oh, I am always anxious about him, and I always shall be, I suppose, to the end of the chapter. No; he hasn’t gone back to his wife; I don’t know where he is or what he is doing just now. He wrote several weeks ago to tell me that he and Mr Vawdrey had had a quarrel and that—well, he said a good deal that isn’t worth repeating. I was wondering whether, by any chance, you had heard from him.’

Matthew shook his head.

‘But if you would like me to make inquiries—if I can be of any use—’

‘No, no, indeed!’ interrupted Anne; ‘I didn’t come to ask

for more favours. You have done so much already and we have made such a poor return—all of us!’ She paused for a few seconds; then, forcing herself at last to look Matthew full in the face, she said: ‘It was only an excuse about Spencer; he will let me know if he is really in need of help. What I want to say to you is that it makes me feel sick and ashamed when I think of the way in which you have been treated. You are big enough not to care, and Maggie and I are only two very insignificant members of the community; still it would make us a little more comfortable if you knew that, whatever other people may say or think, we shall never believe one single word that is spoken against you.’

‘You are very good!’ exclaimed Matthew; ‘I assure you it is more than a little comfort to me to know that. As for the charges that have been brought against me, I can’t very well meet them, because I can’t disprove them. I might give up the money; but that would look more like a tardy admission of guilt than anything else.’

‘You must not think of doing that! Of course you cannot pay these wretches the compliment of letting them think that they have wounded you; and yet—they *must* have wounded you.’

‘I confess,’ Matthew could not help replying, ‘that I did not think my friends would have taken me for a murderer.’

‘Oh, they don’t call you that; they think—but I haven’t the patience to ask them what they think. What they say is that it is a mysterious affair and that it ought to be cleared up.’

‘Well, perhaps that isn’t a very unnatural thing to say.’

‘I call it most unnatural and most ungrateful!’ returned

Anne hotly. ‘Even if there were strong evidence—but there is absolutely none—of your having come into this money by anything but fair means, I should never think of asking what it was worth. I know for certain that you are incapable of a shabby action.’

‘Then,’ said Matthew, his mouth and eyes breaking into a sudden smile, ‘I am content. I won’t deny that I am very sorry to have lost your father’s and your mother’s friendship; but so long as I have not lost yours—’

‘You never will,’ Anne declared firmly. ‘Please remember that; because I may not have many chances of meeting you now. Come what may, you will never be misjudged by Maggie or by me.’

He held out his hand half involuntarily, and she took it; but even as their fingers met, one of her old fits of shyness overcame her. She drew back at once, saying :

‘That is all; I must not keep you any longer now. I am glad I have told you, and so will Maggie be, when she hears. Good-bye.’

Her movement of retreat was executed with such rapidity that she was out of sight before he could say another word; but in truth he was not anxious to detain her. He was grateful, happy—a little bewildered. He wanted to be alone and to bring some order into his ideas and sensations, to certain of which he was scarcely able, for the moment, to give a name. Not until late that evening did he realise that he had been calling them by their wrong name for a long time past; but they were not in any other respect unfamiliar to him.

CHAPTER XI

MRS VAWDREY DOES AN IMPRUDENT THING

FROM the moment that there has been a recognised split between a husband and wife who continue to dwell under one roof, the position of the husband usually becomes the more tolerable of the two. He is seldom or never debarred from seeking such substitutes for domestic joys as are to be found elsewhere ; the indifference which he may have begun by affecting tends rapidly to develope into a reality, while anything in the shape of an understanding is, to his mind, preferable to daily wrangles. But women, who are by nature both more quarrelsome and more forgiving, scarcely understand what it is to be honestly indifferent, and can endure downright cruelty more easily than neglect. Thus it was that while London was assuming its annual aspect of smartness, gaiety and profuse expenditure, while awnings and strips of red carpet were to be seen in every fashionable street and square, and while that fortunate minority of the population which is so very small and looks so very large was entertaining and being entertained from morning to night, Mrs Leonard Jerome was unhappy to the point of asking herself whether suicide was, after all, such a heinous crime.

Leonard had told her briefly what the effect of his late uncle's will would be upon their future fortunes. They were not going to be rich—far from it!—but with care they would be able to

keep a house in London and make both ends meet, he supposed. He had no wish to return to Stanwick, and presumed that she had none. They would, of course, stay where they were until the lease of the house in Hans Place had expired ; later on he would probably join some other fellows in a yachting and fishing expedition to Norway ; perhaps she would think things over and make her own plans for the summer. He added that she would, no doubt, be glad to hear what a handsome legacy had fallen to Matthew Austin's share.

Well, she was sincerely glad to hear of that : as for the remainder of the information vouchsafed to her, it caused her, as has been said, to wish that she was fairly out of a world in which it seemed as if she had no longer any place. Whether she loved Leonard or whether she hated him, he was at all events her husband, and she was keenly alive to the humiliation that he proposed to inflict upon her. Many married men go off yachting or fishing for a few months at a time ; but then they do not, as a rule, leave their wives to crave hospitality of possibly reluctant relations, and Lilian did not see what other course would be open to her after London should have ceased to be inhabitable. She had nobody to take counsel with, although she went out a good deal, nor in any case would she have cared to reveal griefs and perplexities for which there could be no practical remedy. Vawdrey, obeying her commands, had ceased to visit her, and it so chanced that she did not come across him at any of the festivities to which she was bidden ; although, to tell the truth, she looked out for him anxiously everywhere. The sight of his kindly, honest face would refresh

her, she thought ; she wanted to be friends with him again, and she thought very lightly of the passion with which she had been unfortunate enough to inspire him. Judging by previous experience—and by what else do any of us judge?—she was persuaded that a man's love for a woman is at best but a fugitive emotion.

Fate, however, decreed that if she was to meet her former friend no more, she was at least to be gratified by the privilege of an introduction to his mother. This somewhat stern and severe-looking lady, with the white hair, the steel-grey eyes and the tall, spare figure, could smile pleasantly enough when she pleased, and it pleased her to smile very pleasantly upon Mrs Jerome when they encountered one another at a dinner-party.

‘I have heard a great deal about you from my son,’ she said. ‘He tells me that he has not had the pleasure of seeing you lately ; but I am sure you will understand that he is obliged to neglect social obligations. He gives up nearly the whole of his time to his public duties—as indeed it is quite right that he should.’

Lilian had reason to be aware that the rank and file of the British legislature are not subjected to quite so merciless a system of slavery as that ; but she did not dispute the proud mother's assertion, nor was she sorry to find, as she presently did, that Mrs Vawdrey was strongly predisposed in her favour. It was evident that the old lady had heard nothing but good of her, and, from certain remarks which followed, it likewise became evident that sympathy with her and compassion for

her lot were the outcome of such reports as Mr Vawdrey had made to his family.

The results of this meeting were an exchange of cards and a subsequent invitation to tea in Dover Street, where Mrs Vawdrey was keeping house for her son. Lilian's acceptance was quite independent of any desire that she may have felt to renew friendly relations with her dismissed admirer. She liked the formidable-looking old woman and her two fresh-coloured daughters, who had the fine muscular development and the *beauté du diable* which specially characterise the rising generation; besides which, she was at this time willing to go anywhere rather than sit at home. Nevertheless, it was not without satisfaction that she saw Vawdrey stroll into the room after she had finished her tea and had heard his praises sung in various keys for about half an hour.

‘My dear Neville,’ exclaimed Mrs Vawdrey, ‘this is a most unusual compliment! Are we to thank Mrs Jerome for it? I thought the Agricultural Holdings Bill was to come on to-day.’

‘I wasn’t wanted; they will go on talking for ever so long before we get to a division,’ the young man answered. He looked decidedly sheepish and self-conscious as he shook hands with Lilian, assuring her that he had had no idea of the pleasure which was in store for him. ‘My mother told me she had made acquaintance with you—I was very glad,’ he stammered. ‘But she never said that you were coming here to-day; I didn’t understand that at all.’

He seemed rather unflatteringly eager to convince her that her presence had had nothing to do with his early return. She

told him so with a laugh, in which his sisters joined, and then, after one or two apprehensive side-glances at her, he became more comfortable. Lilian, on her side, was not in the least ill at ease: the meaning of his embarrassment was obvious enough to her quick feminine perceptions. The harmless, necessary bride had, of course, been discovered; the young man had yielded to the wishes of his family, had not found them altogether incompatible with his own and was now a little ashamed of certain bygone declarations which ought never to have been made. Well, it only remained for her to persuade him, if possible, that those foolish declarations had not been taken seriously and that no woman could rejoice more sincerely than herself at having been superseded. Whether she was successful or not in her benevolent aim, she contrived, at all events, to make him cheerful and talkative, and it was certain that neither his mother nor his sisters supposed themselves to be assisting at the interment of a dead past.

‘I was thinking, Neville,’ said Mrs Vawdrey, after a time, ‘that, if Mrs Jerome has no other engagement, she might like to take my place and chaperon the girls to-morrow evening. Debates in the House of Commons are not such a novelty to me as I dare say they are to her, and I should be only too glad to escape the fatigue.’

‘Would you?’ asked the young man eagerly, bending forward towards Lilian. ‘You won’t hear any of the great guns speak until quite late, I’m afraid; but we are going to dine at the House, and it’s rather jolly sitting out on the terrace afterwards, if the weather is fine.’

Lilian assented willingly.

'I should like it of all things,' she answered. 'I have no dinner engagement, fortunately, and if there is anything for the evening it can do without me. But are you quite sure that you don't want to go, Mrs Vawdrey?'

'Quite sure, my dear,' replied the old lady smiling; 'nowadays I much prefer reading the reports of the debates in the newspapers to hearing them with my own ears. I don't know,' she added, in a slightly altered and more formal voice, 'whether Mr Jerome would care to join the party.'

'Oh, thank you—no, I don't think he would,' answered Lilian hurriedly. 'I believe he is dining out somewhere, and—and he is not very much interested in politics.'

Leonard certainly was not one of those strange persons who peruse the reports of the debates, nor, so far as Lilian knew, had he ever expressed the slightest wish to be present at one; but it seemed possible that he might raise some objection to his wife's improving her mind in the manner proposed, and, remembering this on her way home, she resolved to request his permission.

'I thought I had better tell you,' she said, when she saw him that evening, 'that I have been asked to dine at the House of Commons to-morrow with Mr Vawdrey and his sisters. I don't know whether you mind my going.'

Leonard looked at her in a way which was perhaps not meant to be insulting, but which she, nevertheless, felt to be so.

'Is there any reason why I should mind?' he asked.

‘Really, I don’t know,’ she answered impatiently. ‘You gave reasons for telling me to shut the door in Mr Vawdrey’s face ; such as they were, I suppose they still exist.’

‘Oh, I didn’t wish to look like a fool, that was all ; but I don’t know that it so very much matters. Having acted like a fool, I may as well accept the consequences. By all means dine with Vawdrey and his sisters, if you want to dine with them.’

In the interests of peace, Lilian would have done well to rest satisfied with that disdainful concession, whether she intended to take advantage of it or not ; but it was hardly to be expected of her that she should submit quietly to treatment which she had every right to inflict, and had in no way deserved.

‘What do you mean when you say that you have acted like a fool ?’ she inquired.

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘I am afraid I can’t give you a very polite reply ; but if you choose to say the same thing about yourself, I won’t contradict you. We both know by this time, that we did an uncommonly foolish thing when we married ; now that we have come to our senses, the only wise thing we can do is to live apart as much as possible without scandalising our neighbours. By the way, I find I can get afloat next week, so that you won’t have to put up with me much longer for the present.’

‘And what am I to do ?’ asked Lilian, turning rather pale.

‘Just exactly what you please. I suppose you would like

to finish the season, and after that you can pay visits or travel about until the autumn, according to your inclinations. I will leave you as much money as you will require.'

There was a pause, and then Lilian said, in a voice which she could not keep from trembling slightly :

'Perhaps you will tell me what I have done to deserve such an ostentatious slight. I don't wish to keep you with me ; you cannot be more anxious than I am that we should see very little of one another. But you yourself seem to think that we had better not scandalise our neighbours.'

'What you have done ! Well, if you really want to know—but what is the use of snapping and snarling ? As for your neighbours, they won't be scandalised unless you see fit to give them cause. You don't like the sea, and you don't care about roughing it ; that is a sufficient explanation of your remaining behind. Anyhow, I have made all my arrangements to go to Norway, and it is too late to alter them now.'

If Lilian was wrong in suspecting her husband of a base intention, it must be acknowledged that her suspicion was not wholly unjustifiable. He had said in so many words that he wished to be rid of her ; he was about to abandon her for an indefinite length of time, without even the shelter of a roof of her own to cover her ; he had already told her that she had been more or less compromised by Vawdrey's admiration, and he knew that, during his absence, she would in all probability meet her admirer frequently. Was it not natural to conclude that he was looking forward, not without confidence, to being set free by a decree of the divorce court ? Many a woman has

been goaded into ruining herself by less provocation, and when Lilian drove to Westminster on the following evening, she was far too miserable and too reckless to be influenced by her mother's dying injunction, although she did not forget it.

To be sure, Vawdrey was not likely now to tempt her with a proposition to which he might possibly have committed himself earlier in the year. She made that reflection, with an inward laugh in which there was a good deal more of bitterness and self-contempt than merriment, while she sat beside him at dinner and listened to his entirely respectful conversational efforts. She had no doubt at all that he was upon the verge of fulfilling his commonplace, enviable destiny; she could see in her mind's eye the blonde, placid, well-born maiden upon whom his mother's affections and his own had been fixed; she felt sure that she would be told all about it before the evening was over, and when, soon after dinner, he led her away from the others to the far end of the terrace above the dark river, she said to herself that the moment for confidential communications had arrived.

But although, when he had begun speaking, the young man's tone and manner were confidential enough, it was not about himself that he desired to talk.

'What is the matter?' he asked anxiously. 'You are looking wretchedly ill, and I saw that you could neither eat nor drink. Are you really ill, or—or has something happened?'

The terrace was thronged with members and their guests; the two girls had contentedly paired off with a couple of elderly gallants and were paying no attention to their brother's proceed-

ings; the continuous roar of the traffic prevented the human voice from being audible at a distance of anything over three yards. The chances are that, if left upon a desert island with a single companion, we should all become perfectly frank and simple in our utterances, and the centre of civilisation where Lilian had taken up her stand was to all intents and purposes a desert island, so far as she was concerned.

‘My husband is going off to Norway for several months, and I don’t know what is to become of me while he is away,’ she answered.

Vawdrey did not seem to be quite as much impressed by the cruelty of Leonard’s conduct as she had expected him to be.

‘Will you—I suppose I have no business to ask such a question—but will you miss him so very much?’ he ventured to inquire.

‘I shall miss my husband no more than he will miss me: why should I? Only I have never been accustomed to taking care of myself, and—and I think I am a little frightened. Of course you wouldn’t understand that sort of feeling. A boy is sent away from home as soon as he is out of the nursery, and long before he is a man he has learnt to stand alone; you don’t know how helpless a woman feels when she is suddenly cut adrift and told to go where she likes.’

But as soon as Vawdrey realised that the house in Hans Place must shortly be given up, that Stanwick Hall was once more in the occupation of tenants and that no arrangements whatsoever had been made for providing Mrs Jerome with

a place of retreat during her period of enforced solitude, his indignation grew voluble enough to satisfy anybody.

‘It is simply monstrous!’ he ended by exclaiming. ‘You are not bound to submit to it—why do you submit to it?’

‘What else can I do? Would you have me implore him to give up his expedition and stay with me?’

‘I think, if I were in your place, I should tell him he might either do that or agree to a permanent separation.’

Vawdrey dropped his elbows upon the parapet and stared silently for a few moments at the swiftly-flowing water and the wavering reflections of gas-lamps beneath him.

‘Hang him!’ he muttered at length between his teeth. ‘I wish to God he would bolt with some other woman!—with that Papillon woman or somebody.’

‘It would suit his purpose a great deal better,’ said Lilian, replying to an ejaculation which may or may not have been intended to reach her ear, ‘if I were to bolt with some other man. Perhaps that is what he hopes for.’

Vawdrey started into an upright attitude and gazed at her interrogatively for an instant; after which his eyelids dropped.

During that instant Lilian suffered an agony of humiliation which was at least commensurate with the sin against good taste of which she had been guilty. To what lower depth of degradation can a woman fall than to invite a former lover to elope with her—and to be rejected? She felt sure that Vawdrey had construed her words as implying such an invitation; she was almost equally sure that he had made up his mind to bind himself by more legitimate ties; if she had obeyed her impulse

and had possessed the requisite pinch of courage, she would have dropped over the low parapet and hidden her shame once for all beneath the rapidly-ebbing current of the dirty Thames. But she entirely mistook her companion, whose opinion of her was far too high, while his opinion of himself was far too modest, to admit of the conclusions ascribed to him.

‘I don’t know what your husband may not be blackguard enough to hope for,’ he said, after a pause which seemed to her interminable, but of which the duration was probably less than a minute; ‘I know what he deserves! However, it’s pretty poor form to talk about thrashing a man when one knows that one isn’t going to do it, and can’t do it. Look here, Mrs Jerome: it’s precious little I can do to help you; but it seems to me that I can do just a little. Why shouldn’t you go down and stay at my place when you leave London? My mother would be only too delighted to have you; she likes you for your own sake, and besides, I have taken the liberty of telling her—she understands how things are with you. Stop a bit! I know what you are going to say. Of course, after what has passed, it wouldn’t do for me to be there; but I don’t mean to be there. I’ve been intending for a long time to take a run across to the United States, and this will be just my opportunity. I shall sail immediately after Parliament rises, and I’ll take good care not to be back before November. Do think of it! It will be dull for you, I know; but at least it will be better than going off to Switzerland or to some beastly watering-place all by yourself; and it’s no figure of speech to say that you’ll be doing the greatest

possible kindness to my mother and the girls if you consent. They will tell you the same thing themselves, only I dare say they will put it in better words than I can.'

Lilian was touched by what she took to be his slightly clumsy delicacy. He was behaving very like a gentleman, she thought, and although it was manifestly out of the question to accept his hospitality, she tried to answer him graciously.

'I am afraid I cannot be your mother's guest,' she said smiling, 'and I certainly cannot drive you across the Atlantic; but perhaps, after you are married, I will stay with you some day. That is, if your wife will ask me.'

'If you wait until I am married, you will never stay with me at all,' returned the young man, in a low voice; 'I think you know that.' Presently he resumed: 'What is the use of pretending to ignore a thing that stares us both in the face? I suppose it is wicked to love another man's wife; but I don't see how one is to help that kind of wickedness; and in my case no harm can possibly come of it, because I am perfectly well aware that you don't love me—'

'I don't!—indeed I don't!' interjected Lilian eagerly.

'Of course you don't,' agreed Vawdrey, wincing involuntarily, but raising his eyes to meet hers with courageous cheerfulness; 'so that the question simply resolves itself into one of expediency. I really do want to go to America, and it stands to reason that I must want to be of any little use to you that I can.'

'Nobody can be of use to me. For the reasons that you know of, I could not stay in your house; but thank you a

thousand times, all the same. I was afraid,' continued Lilian rather breathlessly, 'that when I said that just now about running away with some other man, you might think that, to punish my husband, or out of bravado or spite, I really meant—Oh, here come your sisters! I suppose it is time for us to go and listen to this dreadful debate. Tell me quickly before they are here—tell me that you did not think that of me!'

Vawdrey looked puzzled and astonished: probably he was quite unable to account for her agitation.

'Mrs Jerome,' he answered, 'I give you my word of honour that if an angel from heaven were to tell me you had done anything disgraceful, I—I should hit him in the face!'

So perhaps, after all, he was of some little use to her, since it is a well-known fact that the opinion which others hold of us is the standard by which our conduct is, for the most part, apt to be regulated.

CHAPTER XII

MATTHEW UNDERTAKES AN INTERESTING CASE

WOMEN, it is said, are often unconsciously in love. In the early Victorian days, indeed, when they wore their hair in *bandeaux* or ringlets and had eyes a good deal larger than their mouths, it used to be assumed that this was always the case with them, and that they must of necessity be overwhelmed with surprise and becoming confusion when the young gentleman in the tight trousers dropped lightly on one knee for the purpose of avowing his adoration in well-chosen language. But it may safely be affirmed that such is not, and never has been, the common experience of our own sex. Only a very few of us, like Matthew Austin, are so absent-minded or so altruistic as to mistake the nature of our own sentiments, and even Matthew had the grace to feel rather like a fool when it dawned upon him that he had loved Anne Frere for at least a year without having been aware that he did so.

Was he equally a fool because, after making this tardy discovery, he at once decided that it must be kept to himself? It is not very easy to say how far an innocent man who happens to be under a cloud is bound to accept the disabilities which attach to a guilty one. Most of us, no doubt, would be satisfied with the knowledge of our innocence, and would con-

sider that nothing compelled us to prove a negative; but, rightly or wrongly, that was not Matthew's view. To prove that he had neither unduly influenced Mr Litton nor expedited his benefactor's death was impossible; to resign the fortune that he had inherited would have been futile: people must, therefore, think what they pleased about him, and apparently it pleased them to think very badly of him. Under these circumstances, he could not, according to his ideas, ask Mr Frere's daughter to be his wife; nor, for the matter of that, had he the slightest ground for believing that she would accept him if he did. He rejoiced to know that her faith in him had not been shaken by calumny, his gratitude to her for the assurance whereby she had comforted him was boundless; but he had no intention of telling her what he felt or of seeking opportunities for meeting her. It was in some degree his nature to behave like that. When he had been in love with Lilian Murray (for he certainly had been in love with Lilian, and it never occurred to him to turn his back upon himself by asserting that he had not), he had adopted much the same attitude. A mixture of modesty and pride forbade him to take anything for granted; Anne had shown herself to be a true friend of his, and that—with his present tarnished reputation—was a great deal more than he had had any right to expect of her.

Nevertheless, he saw her every now and again in the course of those long summer days when his loneliness and ostracism weighed so heavily upon him. He saw her father and mother, too, and exchanged a few words with them from time to time, though he was no longer begged to drop in to luncheon or

dinner at Hayes Park in the old friendly fashion. Once, indeed, he was invited to a dinner-party, Mr Frere, as became a magistrate versed in the laws of his country, being of opinion that no man ought to be condemned until his culpability has been established ; but this invitation was politely declined. Matthew, to tell the truth, felt very sore indeed against Mr and Mrs Frere, and would make no response whatsoever to the hints with which they favoured him that they desired nothing better than to be persuaded of his integrity. Since they were so ready to set him down as a rascal, it was not by him that any effort should be made to undeceive them, he thought, and the consequence was that after each of those casual encounters they could only sigh and shake their heads.

Now, it came to pass, one Sunday afternoon, that Matthew went to St Mark's Church, a place of worship which, as the reader has doubtless forgotten, Anne Frere was in the habit of attending during the summer months, and if Matthew had likewise forgotten that circumstance, he was pleasantly reminded of it when, on the conclusion of the service, she stepped forth from a dark corner where she had been sitting unperceived and joined him in the churchyard.

'Have you time to walk part of the way home with me?' she asked. 'I should like to consult you about something.'

He had plenty of time. He fancied—though perhaps he may have been mistaken—that people were less anxious to consult him professionally than of yore, and the few patients whom he had upon his books at that time belonged almost exclusively to the poor and non-paying class. In any case,

he was quite at the service of Miss Frere, who, as he had anticipated, was once more in trouble about her brother. Spencer, it seemed, had been writing for pecuniary aid, and had obtained it. He was out of employment, had no prospect of earning a livelihood and had applied to his sister because there was nobody else to apply to.

‘That is nothing,’ Anne said, in answer to the expostulations which Matthew felt bound to make; ‘I foresaw what must come after he had left Mr Vawdrey, and I have saved a little out of my allowance. But what makes me really unhappy is the way in which he writes about his health. I am afraid he is more seriously ill than he chooses to confess, and I don’t know whether I ought to tell my father or not. You see,’ she added, ‘I am not in very high favour at home just at present, and if I could wait a little longer before putting in a word for poor Spencer, I should have a better chance of success, I think. I believe it is almost decided now that Harry is to be made an eldest son of; but until he comes back from India and everything is settled, not much is likely to be done for the real eldest son. Only I can’t let Spencer die, can I? Would you mind reading what he says about himself?’

Matthew perused the letter handed to him, which had evidently been composed in a mood of profound despondency and in which the writer stated that he was only deterred from hanging himself or blowing his brains out by the conviction that he had but a few months to live, anyhow. He did not specify the malady from which he believed himself to be suffering, nor did he complain of anything, save insufficiency of means to keep

body and soul together ; he merely claimed to know intuitively that he would not trouble the world, nor the world him, much longer. The meaning of these phrases was tolerably clear to the experienced medical man who read them and who, remembering a certain conversation which he had had with Spencer outside the military hospital at Lowcester, was able to say reassuringly :

‘I don’t think there is any need for you to be alarmed. A man doesn’t die unless he has something definite the matter with him, and if your brother had anything definite the matter with him, he would quote a doctor’s opinion. However, you will have a doctor’s opinion upon his case soon ; for of course I shall go up to London to-morrow and see him.’

‘Oh !—did you think I meant that?’ exclaimed Anne, stopping short and looking at her companion in the way which had formerly repelled and provoked him, but which he now no longer resented.

‘No,’ he answered, ‘I didn’t ; but I wish you had. Why should you grudge me any trifling occasion of serving you that may come in my way? I wasn’t too proud to be thankful when you did me the greatest service that one friend can possibly render to another.’

‘What service? I only told you—for my own satisfaction and because I couldn’t help it—that Maggie and I were not insane enough to believe what ought to have been incredible to everybody.’

‘Quite so ; and for my own satisfaction I am going to see your brother and report to you upon his condition. It will cost

me a little money and take up a little of my time : I have more of both now than I know what to do with, and if you cannot accept that much from me, I shall know that you do not really regard me as a friend, after all.'

'I should like you to see him,' answered Anne irresolutely ; 'but—but I am sure you must think that I was hinting. And indeed I was not!—I did honestly want to hear whether you thought I ought to tell them about Spencer or not.'

'Well, I couldn't possibly give an opinion without having had a look at him. You shall hear in a day or two what my impression is, and in the meantime, I hope you won't worry yourself. His complaint, you may depend upon it, is nothing worse than an attack of low spirits, and those attacks don't kill. If they did I should be in a rather bad way myself.'

Thereupon they parted. One of them was too shy to express the sympathy that she felt, while the other was afraid lest a prolongation of the interview should lead him into betraying more than he had any business to betray. The latter, moreover, was not desirous of being catechised respecting Spencer Frere, as to whose condition and its cause he had formed suspicions which were best kept to himself for the time being.

These suspicions of his received ample verification on the ensuing afternoon when he was admitted into the somewhat squalid lodging near Fitzroy Square where Spencer had found a temporary asylum. The languid, pallid, unshaven tenant, who rose from his recumbent attitude upon a horsehair sofa to greet the new-comer without apparent surprise or pleasure resembled

the ex-Lancer only in so far as a very bad photograph resembles its original, and after a rapid scrutiny of him, Matthew was not at all astonished to hear him say :

‘It’s too late, my dear Austin. Anne has sent you, I suppose, but you can’t do any good now. I’m beat, and there’s an end of it.’

‘Very well ; if you are beat—and I can see for myself that you are—somebody else must take command,’ observed Matthew quietly. ‘How long is it since you began drugging yourself again?’

‘Upon my word, I don’t remember. About a month or six weeks, I should think—ever since starvation began to stare me in the face. I never really gave it up, you know, except for a short time after I was married. Why I haven’t come to a poison dose yet I can’t tell you—any more than I can tell you why I haven’t dunned my wife for an allowance. Funk in the one case and a sort of lingering recollection of having once been a gentleman in the other, perhaps. You needn’t trouble to reason with me or preach at me ; it would be only a waste of breath. I’m quite aware of being a despicable wreck of humanity, and I don’t care a straw.’

Spencer had always been a little theatrical in his language and ideas. Matthew, not much impressed by a speech which had probably been intended to horrify him, felt the other’s pulse, looked into his eyes, asked a few questions and then remarked meditatively :

‘Well, it won’t do for me to lose sight of you yet awhile, and you must be got out of this somehow. The best plan

will be for you to come home with me to-morrow. Wilverton is almost empty just now, and, as you will hardly care to stir beyond the garden, the fact of your being in my house can be kept a secret. At the end of a fortnight or so I may be able to see my way more clearly. Of course you will be under supervision; for I need not tell you that there must be no more morphia.'

Spencer laughed drearily.

'You might as well tell me that there must be no more meat or drink,' he declared. 'Don't you understand that I can't live without it? My will is gone—absolutely and utterly gone.'

'You will have to find it again. I don't say that you have an easy or a pleasant time before you, and I fully agree that reasoning or preaching would be thrown away upon you in your present state; but, as a matter of fact, your case is by no means hopeless, and I am going to take charge of it now.'

'You are a fool for your pains,' returned the other, who had once more stretched himself out upon the sofa and had clasped his hands behind his head; 'you know as well as I do that the very best thing you could do for me and everybody else would be to let me die. If you want to be benevolent, why don't you go back to Wilverton, make your report to my affectionate father and request him to fork out a hundred pounds? That wouldn't be a very long price to pay for the blessing of getting rid of me, and at my present rate of progress a hundred pounds ought to be quite enough to see me out. Besides, I am dead sick of this pig-sty of a world. You and Anne are the only decent inhabi-

tants of it that I have ever met, and you seem to get on pretty badly in it, both of you. I tried to pay that Jerome woman out ; but I believe I failed, and I daresay you wouldn't have thanked me if I had succeeded. Give that infernal old landlady of mine a five-pound note to keep her quiet, my dear Austin, and then leave me to wallow in the mire until I choke myself. It's the only thing to be done.'

To this garrulity Matthew responded in much the same manner as he would have done to the ravings of a semi-delirious patient. He knew very well that there would be no great trouble at the outset ; the question was whether Spencer would prove tractable under the restraint which must necessarily be imposed upon him ; after which would arise the further and more difficult question of whether anything resembling a silk purse can ever be constructed out of the proverbial sow's ear. Anyhow, the attempt must be made, and preliminary measures were soon accomplished. On the following afternoon Matthew, having satisfied the claims of the landlady, took with him on his homeward journey a submissive and sadly-dejected friend, for whose reception he had prepared his servants by telegram and of whose presence under his roof he did not contemplate apprising Miss Frere immediately. He foresaw that a more or less arduous struggle would have to be faced, and he did not wish to be interfered with by anybody while it lasted.

For the next ten days he had a somewhat troublesome time of it, although the process of reclamation interested him, and although closer intimacy with his patient brought him a species of compassionate affection for that reprobate. A reprobate the

man unquestionably was, and that he could be permanently reclaimed either in a physical or a moral sense seemed, at his age, extremely unlikely; yet there was a chance for him, and it is one of the first axioms of a physician's creed that no chance ought ever to be neglected. Spencer's fractiousness and feeble efforts to defy control yielded by degrees to the good-humoured patience of his gaoler; he tried hard to do as he was told. Beneath the cynicism which he was fond of parading could be discerned clearly enough the unfruitful germs of a certain nobility. He was pathetically grateful and ashamed of himself at times; he had preferred misery and want to accepting assistance from his wife, who, it appeared, had offered to make him a fairly liberal allowance, upon the condition that he should solemnly bind himself to trouble her no more; he did not complain of his father's severity to him, nor had he a word to say against Vawdrey, of whose behaviour to his secretary and its cause, Matthew heard a full account. Something was wanting in Spencer Frere—some moral quality, for the lack of which his career had been wrecked; but to define it with precision was a task beyond the reach of Matthew Austin's wit. For the rest, he felt a quasi-paternal liking for this ill-grown specimen of the human race whom he had saved alive and a quasi-paternal obligation to do what could still be done for him. Moreover, Spencer was Anne Frere's brother.

Anne, who had been informed by letter that her brother's life was not in danger and that he was being looked after, was at length made aware of his whereabouts and told that she might call and see him any day. Matthew was out when she arrived,

in response to this invitation ; but she awaited his return—as indeed he had expected her to do—and if, on previous occasions, she had shown herself a little ungracious towards Spencer's benefactor, no such reproach could be brought against her now.

Matthew interrupted her assurances of eternal gratitude with a laugh.

'If you were a doctor,' said he, 'you would know that there is nothing we enjoy more than getting hold of a case of this kind. I dare say he has told you what was the matter with him?'

'Oh, yes ; he has told me all about it, and how you have literally snatched him out of the jaws of death.'

'Well, I don't know about that ; he might have lived for a long time, though his life would hardly have been worth having under such conditions. Still I am not going to deny that I am proud of the case. My treatment has been successful, so far as it has gone ; the only question is whether I shall be allowed to proceed with it.'

'You can't keep him here !'

'No, I can't do that, and it wouldn't be to his advantage if I could ; but what I have been thinking of is this. I have a friend out in Western Australia who has been doing fairly well for some years past with breeding horses and who, I am sure, would be glad to give him employment. Of course the life is a rough and solitary one ; but as he is a good horseman, I believe he would like it, and I am convinced that it would be the best thing in the world for his health. What do you think?'

'It sounds almost too good to be true!' exclaimed Anne,

clasping her hands. 'Of course he will go. I don't know whether he would have consented before, but now he will do anything on earth that you tell him to do; he would start to the North Pole to-morrow if you ordered him. But your friend!' she added, her countenance falling suddenly—'will this be fair upon him? Ought he not to know what Spencer's history has been?'

'Oh, that's all right,' answered Matthew laughing. 'I took the precaution of telegraphing to my friend, who says a man with some knowledge of horses and the education of a gentleman will be a perfect godsend to him. They aren't as particular in Western Australia as we are in Wilverton, I assure you. Perhaps those tolerant squatters wouldn't turn their backs even upon me.'

Anne winced a little.

'Don't talk like that!' she pleaded; 'you make me feel as if we ought not to accept anything from you.'

'But it was agreed between us, if you remember, that that was a very unfriendly kind of feeling to entertain.'

'I remember your saying so; I don't remember agreeing with you. However, I am ready to be as submissive as Spencer himself now. We are under such a tremendous obligation to you, he and I, already that the least we can do is to obey your commands.'

'In that case,' answered Matthew, 'I will at once command you to say nothing more about obligations.'

CHAPTER XIII

MR FRERE IS ASHAMED OF HIMSELF

SPENCER jumped at the Australian scheme. With the self-depreciation which it was his habit to affect, he remarked that, although he was absolutely useless, and although it was rather too late for him to think about making fresh starts, he would hardly be able to cause positive discomfort to anybody at the Antipodes, while as far as riding and veterinary knowledge went, he supposed he was about equal to the generality of men. 'Added to which,' he observed, 'there won't be any infernal women out in the bush, I presume—and that is a great pull. If there had been no women in England, I should have been a highly-esteemed member of the community to-day, I daresay.'

Matthew had his doubts about that, but he did not express them.

'There is one woman,' said he, 'who ought perhaps to be consulted before you take your passage.'

'My wife, do you mean? I'll write and tell her that I'm going, if you like: she will be overjoyed to receive the news. I must say for Arabella that there is an honesty about her, when her back is up, which isn't common with her sex. Before we parted, she told me that nothing except the hope of obtaining a position in the county would have induced her to marry me and that she wished to goodness I was dead and buried. Ara-

bella, you may be sure, won't sue for a restitution of conjugal rights.'

'Still you had better let her know what your plans are. And then about your father—I have been thinking that his consent ought perhaps to be asked, if only as a matter of form.'

Spencer shrugged his shoulders. He was of opinion that, since he was of age, and since he had been turned out of doors to shift for himself, the paternal consent might very well be dispensed with ; but in this, as in everything else, he was ready to take his orders from Matthew, whose mastery over him was as complete as that of a huntsman over a broken hound. By his way of thinking, the man who had cured him (if indeed he was cured) of a vice which he had believed to be utterly incurable could scarcely make a mistake.

The next time, therefore, that Anne came to see her brother, Matthew mentioned to her what he proposed to do.

'You see,' said he, 'there is no knowing what may or may not happen in the future, and I should feel more comfortable if there had been no concealment about the business. Sooner or later, too, your parents are pretty sure to hear who has been staying in my house ; one can't keep a secret which is shared by servants and tradespeople.'

'Yes,' she agreed hesitatingly, 'I suppose they ought to be told ; but—but I don't quite know how they will take it, or what they will say about it.'

'Oh, I am afraid you will have a bad quarter of an hour. Naturally, they will be displeased at your having made plans for your brother behind their backs, and, under all the circumstances,

they won't like your having come to this house at all. I wish I could spare you this annoyance; but I don't quite see how I can.'

'I wish,' said Anne a little impatiently, 'that you wouldn't always talk as if I cared for nothing except my own convenience. I doubt whether it will enter into their heads to scold me, and it would not in the least matter if they did. It was about you that I was thinking. You are doing this great thing for us, and we ought all to be most thankful to you; but I am afraid you must not expect them to be thankful. I am afraid—after what has happened, and the way in which they have behaved to you—'

'That they will set me down as an impertinent and officious meddler? No doubt they will; but what if they do? Frankly speaking, they have hurt my feelings so much already that they have quite taken the edge off my sensitiveness. They are heartily welcome to call me anything they like. I am not asking any favour of them, you see, and certainly I am not doing them one.'

'Oh, but you are!'

'Only in an indirect fashion, anyhow. What little I have done has been done for your brother's sake—and for yours.'

Matthew paused for a second before uttering the last words, which indeed he felt that he was scarcely justified in adding; but Anne did not seem to take them otherwise than in a friendly sense.

'You have always been very good and kind to us,' she said. 'Neither Spencer nor I have deserved it, and I am afraid we haven't even acted as if we appreciated it. I am so clumsy, and

he is—well, he hasn't been fortunate in his methods of showing how much he likes and admires you. His quarrel with Mr Vawdrey—'

'Oh, yes, I know,' interrupted Matthew; 'he told me all about that, and I was very sorry that he should have been possessed with a mistaken notion of avenging me. Of course I didn't want to be avenged upon Mrs Jerome, and of course I should have been very sorry indeed if he had been able to get her into any trouble.'

'Yes; but Spencer wouldn't understand that; his friends are his friends and his enemies are his enemies. I suppose he looks upon the enemies of his friends as his enemies too, and his notion of an enemy would be a person who had deliberately done him an injury.'

'But Mrs Jerome has done me no injury.'

'So you are generous enough to say.'

'There isn't any question of generosity in the matter,' Matthew declared, with some earnestness. 'She jilted me, of course; but I should be the last person to reproach her for having changed her mind, seeing that I have completely changed mine.'

'Have you?'

'I believe I ought to say so. I should like to say that I had never been really in love with her at all; but that would be hardly true. However, I can say with perfect truth that I am very glad our engagement was broken off.'

Anne made no rejoinder. She was trying—and he saw that she was trying—not to look pleased. A momentary sense of

hope and exultation swept him off his mental balance, and before he could reflect upon the possible consequences of his words, he had exclaimed :

‘Why shouldn’t there be second thoughts, and why shouldn’t second thoughts be the best, in love, as in other things? Everybody acknowledges the existence of such a sentiment as calf-love, and if one escapes the malady in early life, as I did, one may surely be attacked by it later. Or do you think that a fantastic idea?’

Anne looked slightly troubled.

‘Oh, I daresay you are right,’ she answered hurriedly; ‘perhaps it doesn’t so very much matter, either way. Will you write to my father about Spencer or shall I tell him?’

Matthew said that both methods of announcing what must be announced had better, he thought, be adopted, and as soon as he was once more alone, he addressed himself by a good many uncomplimentary epithets. He had done the very thing that he had made up his mind not to do; he was sure that he had been understood, and he was by no means as sure as he would fain have been that his motives for saying so much and no more were appreciated. Supposing—for mock modesty was altogether foreign to a temperament so honestly modest as his—that Anne Frere cared for him? Would she realise that he could not ask her to become the wife of a man whom her parents despised? Amongst many perplexing questions which suggested themselves to him, as he sat ruefully cogitating in his library, there was but one to which he felt able to return a decisive reply. Whatever happened, he must not tempt her

to make an avowal which she would assuredly see subsequent reason to regret. For the future he must keep out of her way. Friendship between them was out of the question ; he could not trust himself to keep up that pretence, nor had he the right to expose her to risks which, after all, every man and woman on earth is liable to incur under certain conditions. He at once despatched a brief, unvarnished statement to Spencer's father, and in the course of the afternoon a mounted messenger brought him a heavily-italicised reply from Mrs Frere, who said she had been deputed to answer his letter and to thank him, in her husband's name as well as her own, for the interest which he had so kindly displayed in their unfortunate son.

'Both George and I think,' she wrote, 'that we ought to *see* poor Spencer ; so we propose to drive over to-morrow afternoon. But pray, do not think of staying at home *yourself*, if you have other engagements, as no doubt you have. I suppose, if it is decided that Spencer is to go to Australia, he will sail at once. Otherwise, George would feel that he could not be left as a *burden* upon you any longer. I hope, if you *do* happen to be at home when we come, you will kindly make allowance for George's *irritability*. I am sure you will understand that all this has upset him a good deal, and really, with the gout flying all over him, as it is just now, he should not be held quite *responsible* for everything that he says.'

It was easy to read between the lines of this inartistic missive. Evidently, the Freres did not relish the idea of being beholden to one whose acquaintance they wished to drop, while

at the same time they hardly saw their way to spurn his good offices. Consequently, one of them was likely to relieve his feelings by saying very uncivil things and the other was anxious to avert unpleasantness, if possible. Under all the circumstances, Matthew would have been more than human if he had not determined to remain at home and face them. He had done nothing of which he was ashamed, he had no reason to dread anything that might be said to him, nor was he afraid of losing his temper. If Mr Frere should see fit to be rude or insulting, that must be a matter between the old gentleman and his own conscience. To forgive him would be well within the capacity of a philosopher, but to run away from him was really out of the question.

It was, therefore, in a quietly combative mood that the old couple found their former friend, who welcomed them with much politeness, though with an unsmiling face. Mrs Frere, as he helped her to descend from her carriage (for he had gone out to the front door to meet them) did not disguise her nervous apprehensions. She began at once to apologise profusely for the imaginary inconvenience to which they had put Mr Austin and hastened to say that George would rather like to see Spencer alone for a short time, if he didn't mind.

‘Don't trouble about me; I can wait anywhere,’ she added, as if it had been her intention to seat herself upon one of the wooden chairs in the hall.

As for Mr Frere, he looked extremely grumpy and forgot to shake hands with his host, by whom he was suavely informed that he would find his son in the library.

‘Perhaps,’ continued Matthew, ‘Mrs Frere will allow me to offer her a cup of tea in the dining-room while you are having your talk.’

But Mrs Frere, on being conducted into that temporary place of retreat, declared that she did not want any tea. She moved quickly about the room, admiring the etchings on the walls, the view from the windows, the flowers in the garden outside, talking incessantly and so obviously desirous of avoiding any allusion to the object of her visit that common charity forbade Matthew to make her more uncomfortable than she was. Moreover, he really did not wish for explanations which could not, in the nature of things, be satisfactory. He had a grievance, and a very legitimate one, against the Freres; but it was impossible to prove to them that he was guiltless of the offence for which they had chosen to visit him with their displeasure, and, for the time being, at all events, their situation was a considerably more embarrassing one than his own. So he good-humouredly talked commonplaces with the pretty old lady whose appeals to his magnanimity were so thinly veiled, until her husband stumped into the room and said gruffly:

‘Now, my dear, you had better go and see Spencer. Mr Austin, if you can spare me five minutes, we will take a turn round the garden. There are one or two matters which must be talked over before this business can be regarded as settled.’

Matthew noticed the unaccustomed prefix to his name and saw that Mrs Frere had noticed it also. She threw an imploring glance at him as she moved away to obey orders, and he said to himself that he would keep cool. Why, indeed, quarrel with

those who are manifestly in the wrong? He could afford to be generous, although Mr Frere probably did not think so.

What Mr Frere actually was thinking at that moment was that generosity is all very fine, but that—confound it all!—a man doesn't care to have it inflicted upon him until his leave has been asked. He, too, was trying to keep cool; he did not want to be rude or ungracious; still it did go very much against the grain with him to accept benefits from Matthew Austin, while there were certain benefits which neither he nor his son could possibly accept from anybody. When, therefore, he had said what had to be said in the way of thanks, he proceeded to remark:

'But there is one point, Mr Austin, which seems to me to require clearing up. Spencer says he knows nothing about it, but I can hardly believe that your Australian friend is willing to be burdened with a totally inexperienced man who brings him nothing in the shape of capital or premium.'

'Oh, that will be all right,' said Matthew.

'How all right? I don't know what you mean. Am I to understand that you have paid, or propose to pay, money out of your own pocket on behalf of my son?'

'My pocket is almost inconveniently full at the present time,' answered Matthew, smiling.

'So I believe. Whether it has been filled in a manner particularly creditable to yourself is another question. Not that that is any business of mine.'

'Really I don't think it is,' said Matthew.

'Well, I tell you that it is not my business; I acknowledge

that it is not my business ; I don't know what more you can expect me to say. But you will allow, perhaps, that I am the proper person to make any provision that may have to be made for my son's maintenance.'

It was upon the tip of Matthew's tongue to retort that Mr Frere had not hitherto seemed to be of that opinion ; but he restrained himself and only answered :

'Oh, certainly.'

'Very well, then ; the sum, whatever it may be, will be raised—paid, I mean, by me. You meant kindly, I have no doubt ; but I am surprised at your having thought that, under the circumstances—however, I won't go into that. I promised my wife that I wouldn't, and I won't. We're very much obliged to you for all you have done—very much obliged indeed. At the same time, you know, it's—well, to speak plainly, Austin, for once—its damned unpleasant !'

Hurt though he was, and badly as he felt that he had been used, Matthew could not help laughing.

'I assure you, Mr Frere,' said he, 'that there is no occasion for you to consider yourself under the slightest obligation to me. Upon my word of honour, any little trouble that I may have taken has not been taken for your sake.'

'My good man, I know that well enough : that's just the worst part of it ! Well, I said I wouldn't allude to the subject, if I could avoid it ; but how the deuce am I to avoid it ? I tell you candidly, Austin—I know I ought not to say this, but I must say it—that I don't myself believe in the stories which have been circulated about you ; still there they are, and you have

made no attempt to clear yourself. We can't fairly be asked to consent to a marriage between our daughter and a man with a tarnished reputation. That's what my wife thinks, and I'm bound to say that I agree with her.'

'A marriage between your daughter and me! My dear Mr Frere, you must be under some extraordinary misapprehension. I have never for one single moment contemplated asking your consent to anything of the sort.'

'Well, well, well!—But we know how things are; my wife has had suspicions ever since that stupid Baxendale business, and Anne herself—'

'Do you mean to tell me that Anne herself—'

'Confound it all, sir! don't speak of my daughter by her Christian name, if you please. There! I beg your pardon, Austin; I have no business to talk to you like that; but I must ask you to give me your word that this shall go no farther. I'm not saying anything, mind you, about the match not being a good enough one and all that—I leave such nonsense to the women. Your birth is as good as our own, and if only you had kept your hands clean!—'

'I understood you to say that you did not believe in the stories which have been told about me.'

'Did I say so? At all events, other people believe in them; and you're ostracised, you know; I can't let my daughter marry a man who has been ostracised. Surely I'm entitled to say that much—and I can't think why the devil I should feel ashamed of saying it!'

'Shame or no shame, you may be quite sure that your

daughter will not be asked to marry me, Mr Frere,' answered Matthew quietly.

The old gentleman was greatly relieved. He said: 'Then let us drop the subject,' and proceeded to talk for a short time about his son, in whose future good behaviour he professed himself unable to feel any confidence. Ashamed of himself he undoubtedly was, and had perhaps some reason to be; still, after his departure, Matthew could not feel very unkindly towards him. What Matthew longed to know—but could not, of course, have asked—was the nature of the admission which Anne was said to have made to her parents.

'But, after all, why should I wish to know?' he concluded by demanding of himself. 'Even if she cared for me enough to marry me—and I am almost certain that she doesn't—I could not possibly offer myself to her. And life doesn't consist solely of marrying and giving in marriage. Anyhow, my duty is clear enough: I must leave this place as soon as I can, and be forgotten. Perhaps I myself shall forget in time and be tolerably happy, as happiness goes. Only I must have work.'

CHAPTER XIV

BAD LUCK

THE arrangements for the banishment of Spencer Frere were carried out expeditiously and without any hitch.

Everybody (including Mrs Spencer, who wrote to express her personal wishes in unequivocal terms) wanted him to go to the other side of the world and stay there; he himself was eager to be off; and one fine morning Matthew accompanied him down to Plymouth to see the last of him.

‘Well,’ remarked the exile, as he stood upon the deck of the great steamer which was presently to bear him away towards his remote destination, ‘we shall never meet again, Austin, and if I could think of anything appropriate to say to you, I’d say it. In the way of thanks, I mean.’

‘But you have said all that could possibly be said in that way already,’ Matthew declared. ‘Besides, we may meet again before we die—who knows?’

‘We certainly shall not, unless you take a trip to the Antipodes, which isn’t a very likely thing to happen. I solemnly promised the governor, you know, that I wouldn’t return to my native land, and there isn’t a soul in my native land whom I care to see again, except you and Anne. So, you see, there’s a sort of solemnity about this occasion. It’s a death-bed scene, in fact, and dying men are licensed to take liberties, ain’t they?’

'Fire away,' answered Matthew, laughing; 'you won't offend me. What is it?'

'I could answer your question if you wouldn't mind answering one of mine first. Are you still in love with Mrs Jerome?'

'I don't mind telling you,' replied Matthew, after a moment of hesitation, 'that I am not.'

'Very glad to hear it; because she never was worthy to black your boots. My sister Anne, if you'll excuse my saying so, is worth all the Mrs Jeromes alive—and there are a good many of 'em. I can't pretend to understand you, Austin; you aren't a bit like any other man I have ever met in my life, and you won't talk about yourself. But I do know something about women; and what's more to the purpose, I know something about my sister. Now, look here, Austin; don't you play the quixotic ass. It isn't your business to make her miserable even if you enjoy being miserable yourself. If you want to marry her—as I hope and believe you do—marry her and have done with it.'

'I doubt whether you are acquainted with all the circumstances,' Matthew began.

'I'm acquainted with some of them, anyhow, and so is Anne. Would you turn your back upon her if some idiot or other were to accuse her of having robbed a bank or throttled an old man to get possession of his money? Of course you wouldn't. And considering that she is of an age to know her own mind and choose her own destiny, I don't see what particular service you will render her by leaving her in the lurch. That's all I had to say: don't tell her I said so; but just ask her to be your wife,

whether her mother will let her or no. If she refuses you, I'm a bigger fool than you take me for—which is putting things forcibly.'

It was upon these valedictory counsels that Matthew meditated as he journeyed homewards. Poor Spencer was undoubtedly a fool in some respects and had more than once proved himself to be such ; yet out of the mouths of fools words of wisdom may occasionally proceed, and surely there is neither wisdom nor justice in allowing lies to part two people who love one another. By the time that Matthew reached Wilverton he had almost decided to pocket his pride and brave consequences which, after all, could only be considered of secondary importance.

But he did not, in the sequel, carry this half-formed resolution into effect. He could not forget what he had said to Mr Frere ; he could not help perceiving that, although his friends at Hayes Park had abandoned their hostile attitude and made a point of speaking to him when he met them, they were by no means desirous of reverting to bygone terms of intimacy ; above all, he received no sort of encouragement, direct or indirect, from Anne, who had given up attending St Mark's church and who was never to be seen in Wilverton, save under her mother's protecting wing. It may have been, and indeed it was, unreasonable of him to expect encouragement from her ; but he was discouraged all the same, and by degrees he returned to his original conviction that the very best thing he could do would be to get rid of his house and leave the place for ever.

Now it came to pass that, as he was idly perusing the newspaper one morning (for he had a great deal more spare time in

these days than he wished for), his attention was arrested by a paragraph which caused him at once to forget all his own woes. The paragraph was headed **SERIOUS YACHTING FATALITY**, and ran as follows: 'The yacht *Cleopatra* put back into Leith harbour yesterday morning, having carried away her foremast in a squall while on her passage to the Norwegian coast. We regret to learn that this mishap to the vessel has been attended by very severe injuries to one of the gentlemen on board, Mr Leonard Jerome, who appears to have been crushed by the falling spar and whose condition is stated to leave little room for hope. Mrs Jerome, who was not with her husband, was at once telegraphed for, and was expected to reach Leith last night.'

Philosophers and moralists have been agreed from time immemorial that it is a part of human nature to hate those whom we have injured, and love those whom we have befriended. Perhaps that was why Matthew loved Leonard Jerome, whose claims upon his affection were not otherwise conspicuous. At any rate, he did love the man, and his first impulse was to go to his friend forthwith. Then he reflected that they were sure to have secured the best advice, that if they had wanted him they would have sent for him, and that he had no right to intrude upon them in their trouble. Recent experiences had made Matthew somewhat morbidly diffident and distrustful, and he had a shrinking dread of being unwelcome which he had never experienced at any previous period of his life. He thought, however, that he might at least telegraph to Lilian to beg for news; and he was upon the point of doing so, when a telegram from her was delivered to him.

‘Come to us at once, if possible. Leonard is very ill, and most anxious to see you. Pray lose no time.’

Matthew lost no more time than he could help. He was in Edinburgh early the next morning, and the clocks had not yet struck nine when he arrived at the Leith hotel from which Lillian’s despatch had been sent to him. The day was dull and chilly ; for what little wind there was blew from the eastward, and the prospect from the windows of the bare, comfortless parlour into which he was ushered was a dismal arrangement in leaden-grey. Matthew had not felt very sanguine throughout his journey, but now his spirits dropped to the freezing-point of despair. That stern, relentless outlook offered him no glimmer of hope ; the inevitable, inexplicable destiny of man seemed to be staring gloomily into his eyes. The old linger on after life has become a burden to them ; the young are struck down suddenly, stupidly, without rhyme or reason that we can detect ; the survivors bow their heads, let fall a few tears upon the indifferent earth, pass on and in process of time forget. There is nothing else for them to do ; there is no consolation for them, save the certainty of ultimate oblivion, nor any key to the eternal riddle of existence. The pity of the whole business was what struck Matthew ; it cannot be said that he felt any especial pity for Mrs Leonard Jerome, whom he not unnaturally took for a capricious, inconstant woman. Consolation, he suspected, would not keep her waiting quite as long as it detains the majority of young widows.

But he repented of these hard thoughts when the sound of

the door opening and closing behind him caused him to turn his head, and when he saw her advance with slow steps and a colourless, unsmiling face. He had never seen her look quite like that before, nor was her voice the same which had once been so familiar to his ear.

‘He has something to say to you,’ were her first words. ‘I don’t know what it is; he refuses to tell me. But he wrote it down, in case you should not arrive in time. Oh, no; he cannot recover. The doctors think he may live another day or two, and he does not seem to suffer much; but they agree that it is quite impossible to save him. One of them will be here soon and will tell you what is the matter, if you care to know. I didn’t understand all that they said—and it doesn’t signify. Death is death, by whatever name they may choose to call it.’

Her utter dejection softened Matthew’s heart, which could never hold out against the spectacle of human suffering under any of its manifold aspects. He laid his hand upon her shoulder.

‘I am so very, very sorry,’ he said simply.

But she drew back quickly, almost shaking him off.

‘Don’t be sorry for me,’ she returned; ‘there is no need to be sorry. We were not upon good terms—we had not been for a long time, and we never should have been again. He will tell you all about it, and he will tell you that it was my fault. I don’t think so, but that is of no consequence now. Think what you like of me; only please don’t pity me.’

Was this remorse, or obduracy, or despair? Matthew, being without any data to go upon, held his peace, and presently she resumed:

‘Shall I take you to his room now? He wanted you to go to him as soon as you arrived, and nothing can do him any harm—or any good. The doctors say that his brain will become affected soon; but there is no sign of that yet.’

She led the way up a short flight of steps and tapped lightly on the door of a bedroom, which was opened by a white-capped nurse. Lilian, without entering, beckoned the woman out on to the landing and said, in the dry, monotonous accents which sounded so strangely to Matthew:

‘This is Mr Austin, who, as I told you, was expected to arrive to-day. Mr Jerome wishes to see him alone; so you had better leave them together until the doctor comes.’

A few minutes later Matthew was sitting by the bedside of the dying man, whose cold hand was extended to him and who seemed to be both pleased and relieved by his advent. The man was unquestionably dying; that much Matthew’s experienced eye would have perceived even if the statement made in a hurried whisper by the nurse before she opened the door had left him any room for doubt upon the point. But it was in a clear, unfaltering voice that Leonard said:

‘Well, old man; this is bad luck, isn’t it? I haven’t had much luck since I married, and that’s the truth. Haven’t deserved any, I daresay. Some people might call it a judgment upon me; but I don’t suppose you will. No; if I had never served you a worse turn than I did two years ago, it wouldn’t have been necessary to bring you all this long way and—and confess to you, as I must before I die, that I have behaved like a cowardly scoundrel to my best friend.’

‘I don’t for a moment believe that you have done anything of the sort,’ Matthew answered. ‘At all events, if you have ever injured me, either at the time you speak of or at another time, you may be quite sure that you are forgiven. Let us say no more about me ; I want to speak to you about your wife. What is wrong between you, Leonard?’

‘We’ll come to that presently, if you insist upon it, though you’re a bit too late to act the peacemaker, I’m afraid. First of all I must tell you something that ought to make you hate me, if it doesn’t.’ He drew a long breath and then said, ‘It was I who killed Uncle Richard.’

‘It has once or twice crossed my mind that that might have been so,’ observed Matthew quietly. ‘Of course you don’t mean that you killed him in the literal sense of the words.’

‘I don’t mean that I murdered him ; I caused his death. I went up to his room that afternoon after you had met me and advised me to go to him—do you remember?—and he did his very best to make me lose my temper. I wish to God he hadn’t succeeded!—but he did succeed ; and the end of it was that I caught him by the arms and shook him. I suppose the shock must have brought on one of his heart attacks ; for he died the next minute. It was a blackguardly thing to do, if you like ; but of course I never meant to do it, and it wasn’t half as blackguardly as what I did afterwards.’

‘What did you do afterwards?’

‘How do you mean ? You know what I did. At the time it didn’t occur to me that anybody except myself could possibly be accused of having killed the old man ; but I thought I might

be accused and I was frightened ; so I fled out of doors. Nobody knew that I had been with him ; all I had to do was to hold my tongue. Later on I heard how infamously you had been slandered ; but I hadn't the courage to tell the truth then. I doubt whether I should have the courage to tell it now, if I didn't know that my hours were numbered. After me the deluge !—one comfort is that nobody except my sister will be put to shame when my confession is made public.'

'You forget your wife. For her sake, this must never be made public.'

'My wife, I assure you, is not very proud of her husband ; she will be enchanted to hear that she had better reasons than she knew of for despising him. Anyhow, your character must be cleared, and the whole story is written down and signed. Here it is,' added Leonard, holding up a sealed envelope, addressed to 'Matthew Austin, Esq. ;' 'I was afraid you might not reach this place in time for me to ask your pardon by word of mouth ; but they tell me I may linger on for a week or more now. Is there any use in my asking for your pardon, Austin ?'

The question was superfluous ; perhaps, in his heart, he knew that it was. Of all men in the world Matthew was the least likely to turn a deaf ear to a petition which, however tardy, could scarcely have been refused by any mortal of average humanity. But it may be that the scapegoat exceeded the limits of strict veracity a little when he said :

'My dear fellow, you were the victim of circumstances ; in all probability I should have acted just as you did, if I had been situated as you were. One makes a single false step, and it

becomes out of the question to retrace it ; to have come forward and stated that you were the cause of your uncle's death at the time when those ridiculous reports were circulated about me would have been to stir up endless scandal. The good ladies of Wilverton, you may depend upon it, would never have accepted your version of the affair ; they would have wanted to have you arrested for murder there and then, and the chances are that I should have been accused of having participated in the crime.'

'Yes, I thought of that—I did indeed !' exclaimed Leonard eagerly.

'So that you see how little good there would be in starting a fresh nine days' wonder now. Let us drop the subject. It is already stale, even in Wilverton ; and, as I think I remember saying to you once before, I don't set any great store upon the good opinion of the Wilvertonians.'

'Yes,' sighed Leonard, 'you said so once before, and I persuaded myself that I might keep my secret without doing you much harm. But even if you don't publish that written statement of mine, you must promise me to show it to the Freres and old Mrs Jennings and a few others. I daresay that will be sufficient ; only I couldn't die in peace if I thought you had any idea of continuing to screen me at your own expense. It's just the sort of thing that you *would* do, Austin.'

'Make your mind easy,' answered Matthew, after remaining silent for a moment ; 'I will not hesitate to use the paper when my interests seem to require that I should use it. A far more important question is whether you will be able to die in peace

while you are still at variance with your wife. I don't know what she may have done ; but—'

'Oh, she hasn't done anything particular,' interrupted Leonard ; 'she has left a good many things undone, and I tell you frankly that I believe we should have had to arrange an amicable separation if I had lived ; but there is no actual quarrel between us—none of my seeking, anyhow—and she has done all she possibly could for me since she came here. She will marry again after a bit, and I daresay she will be happy ; I'm sure I hope so. She certainly would never have been happy again with me, nor I with her.'

He was about to say something more when his interlocutor checked him by a quiet, warning gesture. Lilian had stolen softly into the room and, standing by the bedside, must have overheard her husband's last words—Lilian, with pale, impassive face and heavy-lidded eyes. Matthew at once rose and slipped out through the open door, which he closed behind him. A reconciliation was much more likely to be promoted by his withdrawal than by any active intervention on his part, he thought.

CHAPTER XV

AN END AND A BEGINNING

MATTHEW did not see Lilian again until after mid-day. During the interim he had the advantage of a short talk with his Scottish colleagues, whose information sufficed to remove any lingering doubts that he may have cherished as to the hopeless condition of their patient. The poor young man was doomed, they said ; it could only be a question of days now, and perhaps, for his sake, it was almost to be regretted that he had not been killed outright.

In such regrets Matthew could scarcely participate. Apart from his wish and belief that the husband and wife might compose their differences before death should sever their marriage bond, he had reasons of his own, and very cogent ones, for being thankful that Leonard had lived long enough to write and sign a certain document. Yet, notwithstanding the promise that he had made, he was by no means certain yet that he could ever use that document. Unquestionably, he had a right to clear his character ; other and far more important things than the restored esteem of the Wilverton ladies and the recovery of the Wilverton practice might depend upon his ability to do so. But perhaps, as Spencer Frere had affirmed, he was a quixotic ass : anyhow, the more he thought of it the less he relished the idea of bringing disgrace upon the memory of a dead friend. Disgrace, unfor-

tunately, must be involved in the revelation of what Leonard had done ; since the culprit had, by his own admission, been guilty of cowardice and deceit, in addition to the original offence which, if only it had been avowed in time, would doubtless have been condoned. And then there was his wife to be thought of, not to speak of the fond sister who had always been so proud of him.

‘It looks to me as if I should have to let him off,’ was Matthew’s conclusion. ‘Perhaps it isn’t such a very enormous sacrifice to make, after all ; for Anne has never believed any ill of me, and, in spite of her brother, I can’t think that she has ever cared for me, except as a friend. Upon the whole, I suspect that I should feel a good deal more comfortable if I were to say nothing about this. Yes ; we poor mortals are so constituted that we study our own comfort even when we seem to be most unselfish. There isn’t a great deal of difference between any of us, and I don’t know what business we have to throw up our hands and our eyes when one or other of us happens to fall a little below the conventional standard.’

These abstract reflections, which were probably prompted by a desire to make some excuse for Lilian, whom in his heart he found it a little difficult to pardon, were interrupted by the entrance of Leonard’s yachting friends—sunburnt gentlemen in blue serge clothes, whose concerned faces and anxious inquiries testified to the sincerity of their sorrow at the mishap which had befallen their shipmate. They shook their heads sadly when they were told that nothing could be done, saying it was a bad job. One of them remarked that Mrs Jerome seemed

to take it pretty coolly ; but this was felt to be an observation of doubtful taste, and he was not encouraged to proceed farther, although it was evident that his companions shared the opinion of Leonard's wife which he had refrained from expressing. They lingered on for some little time, until at length the door was opened to admit Lilian herself, whereupon they scurried away, like so many rabbits. Had they paused to scrutinise her, they would have seen that she did not wear a particularly alarming aspect, and indeed neither their presence nor their headlong flight struck her as worthy of notice.

‘He has dropped off to sleep,’ she said. ‘The nurse thinks drowsiness is a bad sign, though I don’t see why anything should be called a bad sign, now we know that he must die. It seems to have been a relief to him to have had his talk with you.’

‘And I hope it has been a relief to him to have had a talk with you too,’ Matthew ventured to return.

‘Oh, we didn’t talk much,’ she answered, sitting down on the nearest chair and clasping her hands loosely on her lap, as she stared with lack-lustre eyes upon the dreary prospect outside ; ‘there wasn’t much to talk about.’

So there had been no reconciliation, after all. It seemed such a pity, and Lilian’s apathy was so evidently due to despair, not to indifference, that Matthew could not resist saying :

‘I should have thought there might have been a great deal.’

He obtained no response ; but presently she asked :

‘May I know what it was that he was so anxious to tell you ?’

‘Well, I would rather not say. It was a matter between ourselves.’

‘Had it anything to do with me?’

‘Nothing at all; except in so far as that his affairs are your affairs—or would be, if you cared for him.’

‘I care for him more than for anything or anybody else in the world,’ she replied quietly; ‘if I could make him well and strong again now by dying in his place, I would die gladly and thankfully. But I cannot do that, and nothing that I could say or do would make any difference in the fact that he does not love me. He was in love with my face for two or three months, I think: then it was all over.’

‘Are you quite sure that you have the right to say that?’

‘Perfectly sure. Do you think it would be worth while to say things for the sake of being contradicted now? Perhaps you don’t know that when he started off on this yachting trip, he left me literally without a home to go to. I was to travel abroad or settle myself in some watering-place or stay with my friends while he was away; he didn’t care what became of me, so long as I was not with him. I don’t tell you this by way of reproaching him; I only want you to understand, if you can, to what a pass things had come. Even you, optimistic as you are, must acknowledge that no man would treat a woman whom he loved in that way.’

‘I think he might if he were offended or jealous. Of course I don’t say that he would be justified in doing it; but one forgives everything to those who are upon the point of death.’

‘As if there could be the slightest difficulty in forgiving jealousy! Leonard was never jealous; though I tried to make him so at one time. He was rather annoyed, or he said he was,

about Mr Vawdrey ; but that was only because he was afraid of being made ridiculous, not because he had the least objection to my amusing myself, within recognised limits, as he himself d. You have heard about Mr Vawdrey, I daresay.'

'Not very much. I wish you would tell me something about him.'

'He is the only friend I have in the world—unless I may call you my friend still. He is very fond of me and has been very good to me. Too fond of me, as you would probably think, and too good to run away with me, as I almost asked him to do when I heard that I was to be deserted. I don't spare myself, you see ; I don't want to make out that I am any better than I am. Only after what I have said, you must see that what has parted Leonard and me is not an ordinary quarrel which can be made up in the ordinary way. Besides, he doesn't wish for anything of the sort.'

'Yet you own that you love him.'

'I don't think I said that ; I said I cared more for him than for anybody else in the world and that I would die to save his life—which is the truth. But if you were to tell me—and oh, I wish, I *wish* you could !—that there was still some hope for him, and if he were to recover and be himself again, the love that I had for him once would never come back to me. I know people say that love is always a one-sided business ; but I don't believe it. At any rate, I am sure that it can't be so in my case. That was why I treated you so badly ; it wasn't that I had any doubt about your being Leonard's superior. Kindness and indulgence and commonplace domestic affection

are of no use to me ; I want something more. I want something that is not to be had, you will say. Very likely—only I can't do without it. A good many women are like that, I should think, though perhaps no man is.'

As Matthew made no rejoinder (for in truth he could hit upon none worth making), she resumed presently :

'I haven't made you understand ; you still think that I have given Leonard some cause for complaint and that I ought to beg his pardon. Well, I did beg him to forgive me yesterday : he has something to forgive, of course.'

'And what did he say ?'

'He said "Oh, all right !"—and then he hoped I didn't consider it necessary to make a scene because he was dying. So there was no scene—until his sister came and treated us to one. Did I tell you that Lady Bannock arrived from the Highlands yesterday ? She had to go back to Edinburgh in the evening, I forget why ; but she will be here again soon, and then you will be assured that I am to blame for everything that has happened. It was I, it seems, who made Leonard's life so unhappy that he was obliged to sail for Norway to escape from me.'

Matthew could only remain silent. It seemed to him extremely probable that Lady Bannock's accusation was well founded, and if his sympathies were to some extent with Lilian, he nevertheless felt that, at such a time, she might have made believe a little. In the presence of death, don't we all make believe a little?—all except perhaps the poor dying fellow-mortal. Her quick feminine perception divined his thought, and she said :

‘You must not imagine that Leonard would die more happily if I were to tell him untruths. I made the attempt yesterday—because, as you know, I would do anything for him—but it was a complete failure. The only thing that he really wanted was to see you before he died, and now he is satisfied. He said just now that he was satisfied and that he had squared accounts with you. You won’t tell me what he meant; but I think I can guess.’

‘Can you?’ asked Matthew, slightly taken aback.

‘Yes; I know that you lent him money once, and I suppose he has never repaid you. I was very unhappy and very angry about it at the time; now it seems a small thing.’ She walked to the window, where she stood for a minute or two, gazing vacantly down upon the grey thoroughfare, with its continuous ebb and flow of traffic and its throng of hurrying, preoccupied pedestrians. Presently she said: ‘Here comes Lady Bannock, with a pile of luggage. I think I will go back to Leonard and leave you to receive her. Perhaps, if you can manage it, you might persuade her that there is no use in upbraiding me. I don’t particularly mind; only it makes a noise and it does no good.’

A few minutes later Lady Bannock was ushered into the room. Her hat was on one side, her eyelids were red and swollen with weeping, she was evidently smarting under that sense of undeserved injury which happy and prosperous people can hardly help experiencing when overtaken by the woes which are common to our race.

‘Oh, Mr Austin,’ she exclaimed, with comic pathos, ‘why

didn't you marry that woman ! From the first I had a presentiment that she would be the ruin of poor dear Leonard—and now you see ! Why are such cruel things allowed to happen ?'

Matthew could not answer a question which has puzzled the learned and the patient from time immemorial ; but he found Lady Bannock a much easier person to deal with than Lilian had been. A doctor soon learns how to calm the agitation of the clamorously afflicted, and ordinary methods fitted the case of this disconsolate lady. He let her have her breath out, he heard all about Lilian's obstinate unreasonableness, he listened submissively to the whole history of the Vawdrey episode, and then he set to work to soothe the complainant.

'Well,' said Lady Bannock at length, 'I won't quarrel with her ; I won't speak to her at all, if I can help it ; but I shall always feel that it is she who has killed my brother. Still, no doubt you know her better than I do, and perhaps, as you say, there may be her side of the question. It does seem very hard, though, that *everything* should have gone wrong with him since his marriage. I can't think why you should have encouraged it as you did !'

Matthew kept his countenance and diverted the conversation by degrees into more practical channels. Lady Bannock was not really wanted, nor could she be of any service to her brother ; but he found something for her to do and soon persuaded her that she was indispensable. Thus the peace was kept and conflicts were avoided during the trying days that followed.

Leonard Jerome was a strong man, although he had not

of late been a very healthy one, and he lingered on, in a state of semi-consciousness, for nearly a week. Once or twice his eyes rested with a troubled look upon Matthew ; but he never spoke intelligibly again, nor did he bestow any sign of recognition upon his wife, who nursed him assiduously up to the end. That was the least that she could do, Lady Bannock said. It was likewise the most that she could do, and she did it in such a manner as to earn the praise and admiration of the doctors. One doctor, who knew her rather better than they did, would have admired her more, had she displayed a little more feeling ; but Matthew Austin, it is to be feared, will never be able to judge Lilian Jerome with strict impartiality. For the rest, he always has been, and still is, ready to fight her battles.

When all was over he did what had to be done for her in a quiet, businesslike way ; so that she scarcely knew of how many painful duties and harrowing discussions she had been relieved by his thoughtfulness. She was half stunned ; she had not the faintest idea of what she ought to do or of what her future life was to be, and she obtained neither comfort nor counsel from Lady Bannock, by whom Matthew took care that she should not be disturbed. It was Matthew who secured a reserved compartment for her on her melancholy southward journey ; it was he who contrived that quarters should be ready for her at Stanwick Vicarage (the hall being in the occupation of strangers), and it was he who made all the necessary arrangements for the funeral. She simply obeyed his instructions, as a child might have done, and thought no more of thanking him than a child thinks of thanking its nurse. Lord Bannock, who

had been summoned in haste by his wife, was not less willing to leave the management of details in the hands of this capable person. His lordship said frankly that he didn't like ghastly jobs, and that he supposed doctors were accustomed to being mixed up with undertakers and coffins and horrors of that sort.

It was on a fine summer day that the remains of the last representative of the Jerome family were deposited in the vault where his ancestors' bones lay. Except during the brief period that we know of, he had been a non-resident landlord and had seen little either of his neighbours or of the few tenants upon a shrunken property; but sympathy or the desire to witness a somewhat imposing ceremony brought many mourners and carriages to swell the *cortège*, while from more distant parts of England came quite a respectable number of gentlemen amongst whom Leonard had been popular and who were anxious to give evidence of the regret with which they had heard of his untimely death.

These were received by Lord and Lady Bannock at the Railway Hotel, where they had found temporary shelter; Matthew was not troubled with them, his task being to see that Lilian should be safely escorted to the church under the wing of the Vicar's wife and that she should be spared as much as possible from intrusion or curious scrutiny. But when the prolonged and mournful rite was over, when Lilian, who had borne herself with apparent composure throughout and who had never once lifted her heavy crape veil, had been led away and when the mourners were dispersing, he was touched on the elbow by a fair-complexioned young man, who said :

‘You are Mr Austin, are you not? Might I speak to you for a minute?’

‘Of course,’ answered Matthew. And then, after a second glance at the other, ‘Perhaps your name is Vawdrey?’

The young man nodded, reddening slightly.

‘I daresay Mrs Jerome may have mentioned me to you,’ he said. ‘I wasn’t invited to come here to-day ; only—’

‘I am sure Mrs Jerome will think it very kind of you to have come,’ Matthew declared. ‘Many of poor Jerome’s friends have travelled a long way, uninvited, to pay this last tribute of respect to his memory.’

‘Well, I can’t say that he was exactly a friend of mine,’ Vawdrey confessed. ‘Are you going to walk back? If so perhaps you would let me walk with you.’

Matthew at once assented, and presently the two men left the main road, striking across country by a field-path which, if it did not lead directly to the railway station, at least secured them that freedom from observation which one of them desired.

‘I was saying,’ resumed Vawdrey, ‘that Jerome was no friend of mine, and I’m bound to add that I had no respect for him either. Of course it’s sad that he should have been killed like that ; but—’

‘Before you go any farther,’ interrupted Matthew, ‘I must tell you that he was a friend of mine and that I was very fond of him. No doubt he had his faults and his married life was not happy ; still all that is over now ; I would rather not talk about the subject. Besides, it was about Mrs Jerome, not about him, that you wished to speak, was it not?’

‘Well, yes ; I wanted to ask you whether you knew anything of her plans. The fact is that I have a message to give her from my mother ; only I don’t quite see how I am to deliver it. We are very anxious—at least my mother and my sisters are—that Mrs Jerome should go down to my place in Lincolnshire for a bit, unless she has made some other arrangement. We think she might be glad of the rest and the absolute privacy ; because it is rather a large house, and she could have her own rooms, where nobody would disturb her. I myself am going off to America next week, and I don’t expect to be home again much before the winter. Do you think she could be prevailed upon to come ?’

‘I should think she might,’ answered Matthew, smiling ; ‘at any rate, I will give her your message. Unfortunately, she has very few friends, and I suppose, from what you say, that Mrs Vawdrey must be one of the few.’

‘Oh, yes ; my mother is devoted to her, and—and awfully sorry for her. I don’t want to say anything against Jerome, now that he is dead—especially if he was a friend of yours ; but really I don’t see how anybody could have been a friend of hers without being sorry for her.’

‘Oh, I am sorry for her. She is very much alone in the world, and where she will settle eventually I can’t tell ; probably she herself has hardly faced that question yet. For the present I believe she is going to some cousins of hers who have asked her to stay with them, but I daresay she will be glad to accept Mrs Vawdrey’s invitation later on. Shall I say that your mother will write to her ?’

Mrs Vawdrey, it seemed, had not neglected that customary formality. Her son produced a bulky envelope from his pocket which he said that he would himself have handed to Mrs Jerome, had he not been afraid of intruding upon her. And he was particularly anxious that she should be informed of his imminent departure for the United States.

‘If she goes to my mother, she sha’n’t see a soul whom she doesn’t want to see all the time she is there,’ he promised.

Matthew could not help laughing.

‘Perhaps,’ he remarked, ‘by the time that you come back from the United States she may want to see you.’

‘Do you mean that?’ asked Vawdrey a little breathlessly. ‘Do you really think that some day—of course not now, but *some day*—she would let me have a chance of proving to her that all men are not such black—ahem!—that all men are not so extraordinarily blind as Jerome was?’

‘Why not? Women are not very comprehensible to me, and Mrs Jerome is even more complicated, as a study, than the general run of her sex; but I should say that what she and they chiefly insist upon is unconditional adoration. If you can give her that—and make her wait a few months for it—you will earn her esteem, and all other things will probably be added unto you. However, this is a purely academic opinion: you must take it for what it is worth.’

‘You evidently don’t know much about her, or you wouldn’t speak of her in that nasty, sneering way,’ returned Vawdrey, slightly affronted.

Nevertheless, when he reached the railway station, he shook

this cynical doctor warmly by the hand, and he took away with him a somewhat lighter heart than had beat beneath his waistcoat earlier in the day. Hope springs eternal in the human breast ; Mrs Jerome could not, in the nature of things, mourn very long for a husband who had made her life miserable, and it was at least some comfort to feel sure that if Matthew Austin had been enamoured of her once, he was enamoured of her no more. Benevolent or cynical, the man was not to be dreaded as a rival—and that was the very point as to which Vawdrey had hitherto felt a little doubtful.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FALL OF THE CURTAIN

‘OH, I know what you think,’ Lilian said that evening. ‘You mean to be extremely kind, but you can’t help looking upon me as a “case,” and you foresee a remedy which will settle everything satisfactorily. All the same, it is not because I am going to adopt your remedy that I have decided to accept Mrs Vawdrey’s invitation ; it is only because I like her, and because I want to get away from people who know my whole history. I want to rest and collect my wits, and form some scheme of life for the future.’

‘That is quite understood,’ answered Matthew gravely. ‘I only gave you the message that I promised to give. No doubt you will have left Lincolnshire long before Mr Vawdrey returns from his travels.’

‘Yes, and very likely he will change his mind in the course of his travels. But you know what he wants now, and you think it would be an excellent thing for everybody concerned if he were to get it. I am not sure that Mrs Vawdrey would agree with you, though. Oh, what a complicated world it is, and how I wish I had never been sent into it!’

‘We must make the best of a state of existence which was conferred upon us without our consent having been asked or obtained,’ observed Matthew philosophically. ‘For the great

majority of human beings life means something very much worse than it can ever mean for you or me.'

'How do you know? It would be terrible for you or me to live in the neighbourhood of the Seven Dials; but suicides are not more common amongst the people who do live there than in our own class, are they? We are just as unhappy as they are when things go askew with us, and I don't see how things can possibly go straight again in my case. However, I won't weary you with my sorrows. You wouldn't believe in them; or, if you did, you would set them down as merely sentimental sorrows, not to be named in the same breath with hunger or disease.'

It was true that Matthew could feel no great pity for the young widow. He was tolerably certain that she would end by marrying a man who not only loved her but was a thoroughly good fellow, and was rich enough to provide her with every material luxury into the bargain. If it came to a question of pity, he thought he knew somebody rather more deserving of compassion than she could claim to be. Pale, listless and despondent though she was, he was unable to believe that the memory of her first unhappy marriage would cast a permanent shadow over her life. And in this it must be owned that he judged her rightly. Lilian's grief was deeper and likely to prove somewhat more enduring than he supposed; but she was still very young. It is only when youth has departed that melancholy makes herself at home with us, knowing that we shall not try very hard to drive her away.

As for that other person whose case seemed to be less

hopeful than hers, Matthew had never been wont to expend much pity or sympathy upon him. With good health, with work to do and with a lively interest in the monotonous, yet ever-changing, drama of contemporary existence, a man has no business to sit down and groan. Nevertheless, after he had journeyed with Lilian, on the morrow, as far as the junction where their routes diverged, and after he had shifted his travelling-bag into an empty smoking-carriage, he did, for once, give up an hour or so to being sorry for himself. His really was—as Leonard might have called it—bad luck. Bad not so much because he was precluded from ever telling Anne Frere that he loved her as because it had been so very nearly within his power to make that avowal. In his pocket he had a document which, if made public, would re-establish his fair fame, a document which the writer had both permitted and requested him to make public, a document which, if it would not of necessity procure the fulfilment of his wishes, would, at least, entitle him to state them without fear or hesitation. And for whose sake did he propose to suppress this invaluable proof of his integrity? For the sake of one whom ‘slander, censure rash’ could no longer touch, who ‘had finished joy and moan’? For the sake of Lilian, whose dead love for the dead man had never been combined with respect, and to whom consolation was already beckoning?

‘It seems queer,’ reflected Matthew, with a rueful grimace, ‘but I suppose the actual truth is that I am going to turn my back upon all sorts of pleasant hopes for my own sake. Put it how you will, there are things which can’t be done without self-contempt, and kicking the body of a dead friend is one of them.

The fact that poor Leonard is beyond reach of being hurt by any indignities makes no real difference.'

In this way he strove to convince himself, and finally did almost convince himself that, since he was only going to do what he wished to do, he had nothing to grumble about. Of course, after he had reached home and had begun to make preparations for quitting the old house which had grown dear to him, he had some moments of bitter regret; of course, too, there were moments when he wished that Leonard had chosen another method of making posthumous reparation than that of addressing a confession to 'Matthew Austin, Esquire.' He had not quite heroism or stoicism enough to rejoice that a responsibility had been thrown upon him which might so easily have been handed over to somebody else. Still, having made up his mind, he never thought of changing it; nor was he tempted to do so by the only form of temptation which would have been hard to resist.

For Anne Frere remained invisible; although, if the truth must be confessed, he went a little out of his way to haunt those districts of the town and country in which there was a reasonable probability of encountering her. That she and her parents must have heard of his impending departure seemed certain. He had placed his house in the hands of an agent, his furniture was advertised for sale, and Dr Jennings, amongst other neighbours, had not failed to express, in *agro-dolce* accents, his regret that Mr Austin had determined to abandon a lucrative practice, together with some discreet curiosity as to Mr Austin's motives for so doing. In provincial circles every-

body knows all about everybody else ; the Freres could hardly be unaware of the bereavement which was in store for Wilverton ; and, since they did not see fit to go through the formality of declaring their sorrow, it could only be presumed that they had no sorrow to declare. For the matter of that, it was but natural that the old people should rejoice to be delivered from an embarrassing vicinity ; Mr Frere had been perfectly frank upon the subject, and had perhaps been only partially reassured by the assertion which his frankness had elicited. But Anne, who had once proclaimed herself Matthew's friend after a somewhat unusual and unconventional fashion, might surely, if she had wished to do so, have found some means of letting him know that he had done nothing to forfeit her friendship.

In any case, he could not go away without bidding her good-bye : amongst the many solaces which he had resolved to deny himself, the melancholy one of holding her hand in his for the last time was not one. So when the day which he had fixed upon for his final retirement from those familiar scenes was near, he drove out to Hayes Park, inwardly determining that, if Mrs Frere should not be at home, he would leave a note to ask when he might call again for the purpose above named.

But Mrs Frere was at home, and was, or professed to be, very glad to see him. She had been intending, she said, to write him a note ever since she had heard that he was leaving Wilverton, and to beg that he would not go without paying them a farewell visit ; but she knew how horribly busy he must have been. Packing up was always such heart-break-

ing and back-breaking work ; it was really no kindness to thrust oneself upon one's friends when they were engaged in that way. 'You are going to London, of course. Well, I can't wonder at your preferring civilisation to stagnation ; I have felt from the first that you were altogether thrown away down here. Though you will be dreadfully missed, no doubt, and what George will do the next time that he is ill I can't imagine ; for he swears that nothing will induce him to call Dr Jennings in again. Perhaps somebody nice may come in your place ; one can but hope so.'

To all this volubility Matthew, with his elbows on his knees and his hat balanced by the brim between his long fingers, listened smilingly. It was impossible to be angry with Mrs Frere ; it was even impossible to watch her without a certain feeling of admiration and envy. That she was neither comfortable nor happy was evident ; but that she did not intend to increase her unhappiness and discomfort by permitting her visitor to embark upon painful explanations was quite equally so. In vain Matthew attempted to reply that he had no present intention of settling in London, that he was without definite plans, that he thought of wandering about the Continent for a time, and so forth. She sheltered herself behind her deafness, pretended to think that he was weary of Wilverton and quite agreed with him that he might do far better elsewhere. Any special reasons that he might have for severing his connection with a place where he had been doing tolerably well she tacitly begged him to ignore, and ordinary good manners imposed compliance with her request upon him.

After a time Mr Frere came in, and showed himself less placidly bent upon making the best of things and steering clear of possible unpleasantnesses than his wife. He said :

‘All I can tell you is that I’m devilish sorry you’re going, Austin ; though I can’t honestly pretend that I should have wished you to stay on. Well, well !—least said soonest mended, no doubt ; only it does seem to me that you have been victimised by the wrong-headedness of a parcel of silly women. You needn’t trouble to make faces at me, my dear ; Austin knows very well what I mean, and he won’t misunderstand me. He doesn’t answer, you see—and quite right too ! What about that poor little Mrs Jerome, Austin ? We heard of all your kindness to her, and we weren’t surprised. We ought to know, if anybody does, that you are made up of kindness to people who don’t deserve it, most of ’em.’

In answer to further inquiries, Matthew related the whole story of Leonard’s accident and death, dilating at greater length than was necessary upon the financial and other prospects of the widow, because, all the time that he was talking, he had a hope that Anne would presently enter the room. But this hope was not fulfilled, and at last he had to take his leave.

‘Please say good-bye for me to Miss Frere and to Maggie,’ were his last words. ‘I am sorry not to have seen them and made my adieux in person.’

‘They will be very sorry too,’ returned Mrs Frere amiably. ‘Maggie is away for a week, staying with some friends, and Anne has gone out for a walk, I believe ; but I will certainly

deliver your message to them. Good-bye, dear Mr Austin ; don't forget us, and if you should ever find yourself in these parts again—'

'Yes ?' said Matthew, rather cruelly.

'But I am afraid you never will ; there is really nothing to bring you here. Good-bye.'

Thus was Matthew plainly given to understand that the curtain had fallen upon the last act of the Wilverton drama. He had had no business to expect anything else, and he felt that it was rather silly to tell his groom to drive home, alleging that he preferred to walk. Still, since just a chance remained, why should he deprive himself of it ? It took him a long time to stroll across the park, and when he reached the stile where—as he remembered, with a pang of regret and with half-amused wonderment at all that had happened since—he had once parted from Anne on a frosty, starry night, he was in no great hurry to pursue his way along the dusty high-road. Not that delay was likely to be of any service to him ; he would have met her before now, if he had been going to meet her at all. Moreover, nothing could be more obvious than that she did not wish to meet him.

He was still wondering what her objection could be to bidding an unobtrusive and unsentimental friend God-speed when she emerged from the shadow of the neighbouring hedge-row with a suddenness which took his breath away. He had not heard the sound of her footsteps upon the wayside grass, nor, of course, had she expected to find her path barred by a stooping, masculine form ; so that she was quite as much startled

as he was, and for an instant they both remained foolishly speechless.

But the necessity of saying something could not be eluded for more than an instant. He explained that he had been calling upon her parents to say good-bye, and she remarked that she had been down to the village to buy some stamps. A somewhat strained conversation followed, in the course of which Matthew was once more called upon to furnish particulars of his journey to Scotland, and which Anne wound up by observing that it was time for her to move on towards home. But this was more than Matthew could stand.

‘Miss Frere,’ he said, ‘I am going clean away out of your life, and, as far as I can see, the chances are against our ever meeting again. Won’t you let me have the memory of some pleasant speech to take with me? Your father was more generous. He said he was sorry—devilish sorry, in fact—that I was leaving ; although—’

‘Oh, don’t!’ interrupted Anne, in a pained voice ; ‘I would much rather not hear what he said. I know what he said to you that afternoon before Spencer went away, and I have been ashamed to look you in the face ever since. I thought you would have understood.’

Matthew forced himself to laugh.

‘Oh, that was only nonsense,’ he answered steadily ; ‘of course I understood that it was nonsense.’

‘I could not feel at all sure that you would think so ; it must have sounded very like sense. You knew that I had refused Sir William Baxendale, you knew that I had even gone,

alone and uninvited, to your house to assure you that Maggie and I still believed in you, whatever other people might say ; if you had drawn your own conclusions nobody could have blamed you. It never struck me that I had done anything out of the way, or—or anything that could be misconstrued, until I heard what had passed between you and my father. I wanted very much to see you again and say good-bye and thank you once more for all your great kindness to us ; but, after that, how could I? My only hope was that you would realise the impossibility and that you would not think me ungrateful. I scarcely dared to hope that you would see what an absurd delusion my father was labouring under.'

Matthew began to say, in a cheerful, matter-of-fact tone, that delusions of that kind, though not unnatural, were sufficiently obvious to a man who had not parted with all vestige of common sense ; but he did not end his sentence as he had proposed to do. He ended it in quite a different manner, being completely thrown off his mental balance by Anne's hasty clutch at her pocket-handkerchief and by the discovery that tears were running down her cheeks. How did it come to pass that, the next moment, he was holding her in his arms and that, although scarcely an intelligible word had been exchanged between them, there was no need of words to bring about entire mutual comprehension? This is a question which neither he nor Anne could answer at the present day, if put upon their oaths ; but indeed there is no reason at all why they should wish to answer it. What at the time seemed to one of them to be of paramount importance was that he should

point out how far his intentions were from being what is commonly called honourable. Honour, according to his notions and assertion, rendered it imperative upon a disgraced man to remove himself forthwith from the neighbourhood and never be heard of again. He could not ask Mr Frere to consent to a union which that gentleman would never sanction, nor would it be fair to throw upon his wife any share in the burden of his supposed guilt.

‘As if I should let you leave me!’ Anne exclaimed, laughing through her tears. ‘It is bad enough that I should have loved you all this long time and tried to deceive myself and you without a shadow of success; now that I am already humbled to the dust, it isn’t any small additional effrontery that will scare me. I am of age; I can marry whom I please; and even if my father and mother raise objections for form’s sake—but I doubt whether they will—they will be obliged to give in, with a good grace. As for that ridiculous slander about poor old Mr Litton’s death, I believe it is almost forgotten by this time.’

‘Only I can’t clear myself of suspicion.’

‘Have I ever asked you to clear yourself? And has anybody else the right to ask that of you?’

Matthew meditated for a moment, and then drew Leonard’s letter from his pocket.

‘No,’ he answered, ‘I am not sure that anybody else has the right; but I think you have. Will you read this, Anne, and will you give me your word of honour never to breathe a word of what you have read, except to me?’

She gave the required pledge unhesitatingly, and, after she had slowly perused the document, handed it back.

‘I understand,’ she said. ‘I won’t pretend that I should have been so generous in your place ; but I love you and admire you all the more for your generosity.’

‘And you are still willing to brave the risk of hearing your husband called a criminal?’

‘I don’t think,’ answered Anne, ‘that anyone will ever dare to speak of my husband by that name when I am present, and I am quite certain that no one will ever dare to do it twice.’

So, with laughter, and with a few tears, this couple sealed a compact which has never been, nor ever will be, broken ; and Leonard Jerome’s confession, after having been torn into a hundred pieces, was scattered to the four winds of Heaven. Mrs Jennings is of opinion that those poor Freres were glad enough to bestow their daughter upon a man so well able to provide for her, however dubious may have been the methods by which a part of his fortune was acquired ; but Mrs Jennings is comparatively harmless in these days. Wilverton, as a whole, is not a little proud of its connection with that celebrated physician Sir Matthew Austin, while Sir Matthew’s father-in-law is wont to declare to all and sundry whom it may concern that there is only one man in England who knows how to treat the gout.

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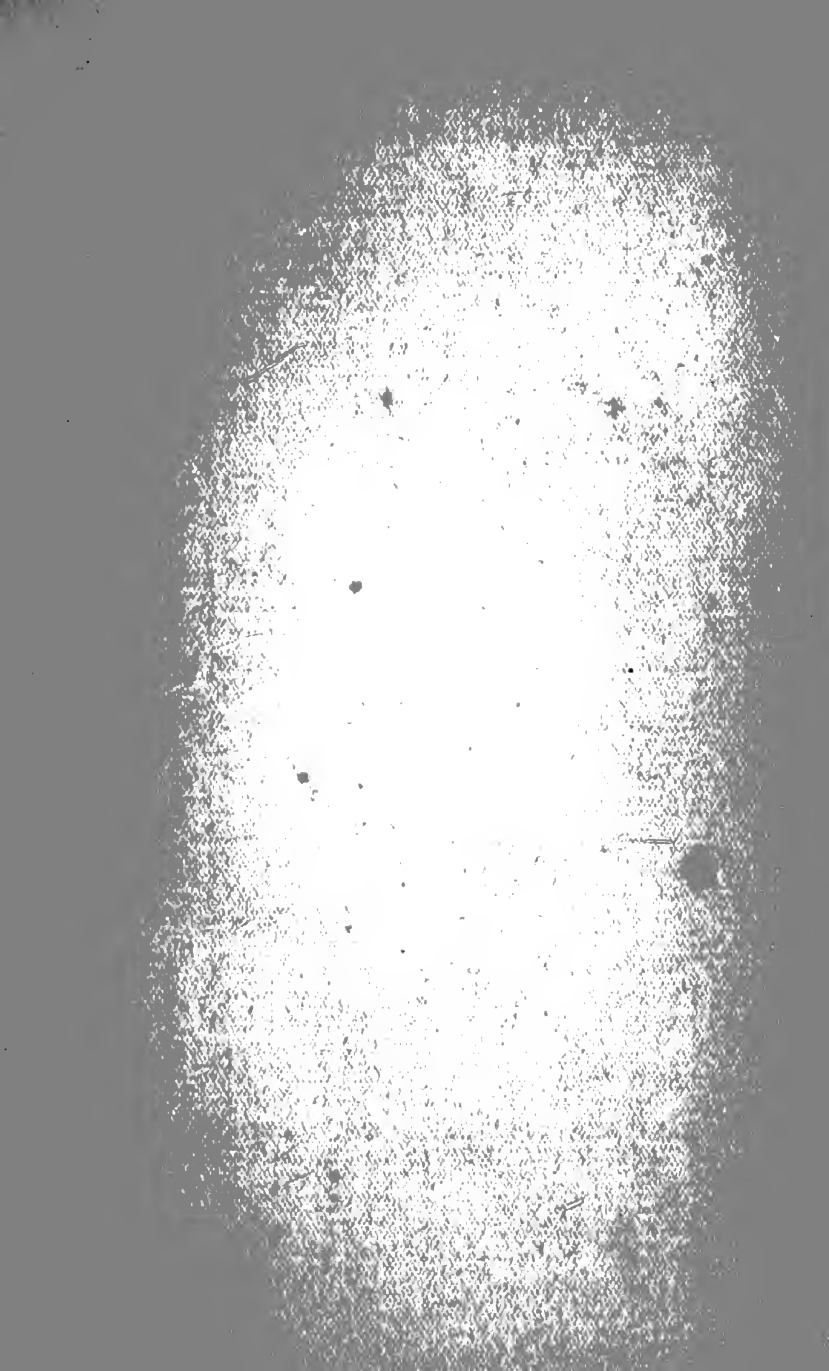
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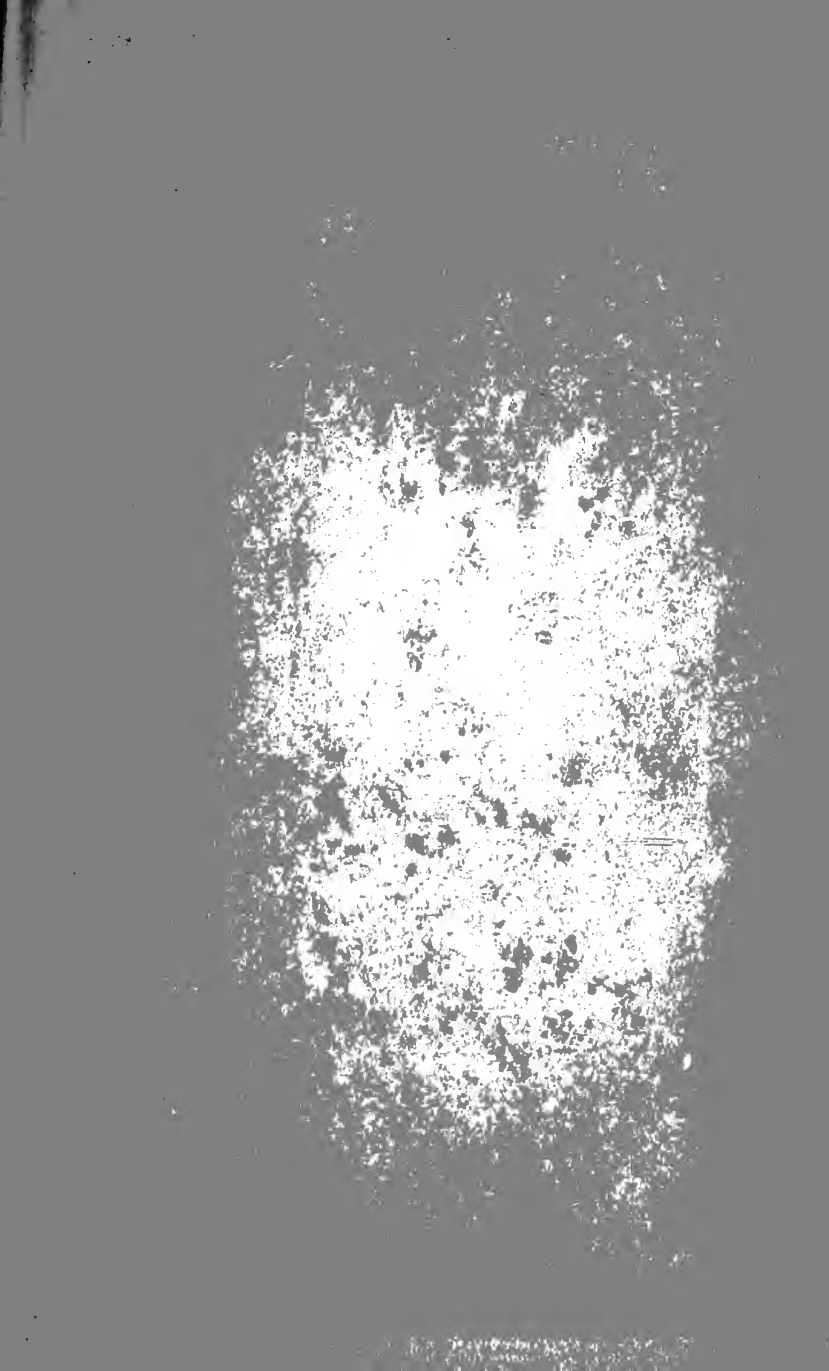
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